

Christology: Jesus Christ

by Greg Herrick

The sermon explores the doctrine of Christology, examining the preexistence, humanity, deity, incarnation, death, resurrection, ascension, and return of Jesus Christ.

Scripture: Matthew 1:23, John 1:1, Acts 2:33, 1 Corinthians 15:3, Ephesians 1:20, Philippians 2:6, Colossians 1:17, Hebrews 2:14, Revelation 19:16

Topics: "Christology", "Incarnation"

Description

Greg Herrick delves into the comprehensive study of Christ, known as 'christology,' covering various aspects such as the preexistence of Christ, Old Testament prophecies about Christ, his humanity, deity, incarnation, temptations, sinlessness, death, resurrection, ascension, exaltation, return, three-fold office, and states. The sermon explores how Christ's preexistence is evident in the New Testament, the fulfillment of numerous prophecies in the Old Testament, the humanity and deity of Christ, the significance of his incarnation and kenosis, the impeccability of Christ, his sacrificial death, victorious resurrection, ascension, exaltation, and the future return of Christ as King of Kings.

Transcript

The term "christology" (from Greek *christos* meaning "anointed one" or "Christ") refers to the study of Christ. It often includes such topics as the preexistence and eternity of Christ, OT prophecies about Christ, Christ's humanity, deity, and incarnation, as well as the issue of his temptations and sinlessness, his death, resurrection, ascension and exaltation, return, three-fold office, and states.

The Preexistence of Christ

There are several texts in the NT that speak in one way or another to the preexistence of Christ. John says the "word" became flesh which implies that he had existed previous to his incarnation (John 1:1, 14). Jesus himself suggests his preexistence in a number of texts. He said he had glory with the father before the world was (John 17:5) and that he had come from the father (John 5:43; 6:38). These imply preexistence. Paul also, in referring to Christ as the last Adam, implies his preexistence since Jews often held that both Adam and Moses were preexistent. So also when he says that Christ was "rich," but then became "poor," that he was "in the form of God," but "humbled himself," that he was "before all things" (Col 1:17). Both these references refer to the humiliation of the incarnation and therefore suggest that Christ existed previous to his coming to earth (see 1 Cor 15:45; and Phil 2:6).

Prophecies About Christ

Taken in the light of the entire canon, the historical fact of the resurrection, and with a view to Jewish hermeneutics, there are many prophecies about Christ in the Old Testament. Some of the familiar ones include: his birth (Gen 3:15; Gal 4:4); his lineage (Gen 49:10; Luke 3:33); his place of birth (Micah 5:2; Luke 2:4-7); his Galilean ministry of compassion and judgment (Isa 9:1-2; Matt 4:14-16); that he was the prophet to come (Deut 18:15, 18-19; Acts 3:20, 22); that he would function as a priest (Psalm 110:4; Heb 5:5-6); his betrayal (Psalm 41:9; Luke 22:47-48); his being sold for thirty pieces of silver (Zech 11:11-12; Matt 26:15; 27:1-10); his violent death (Zech 12:10; John 20:27); his resurrection (Psalm 16:10; Luke 24:7; Acts 2:25-28); his exaltation to God's right hand (Psalm 110:1; Acts 2:33-34), his eternal reign in fulfillment of Davidic promise (2 Sam 7:12-16; Psalm 110:1; Isa 55:3; Acts 2:33-34; 13:22-23, 32-34).

The Humanity of Christ

There are several lines of evidence in the Scripture which converge to prove that from a Biblical point of view Jesus was truly and thoroughly human. Jesus had human names (i.e., Jesus, Son of David), was experienced by others as a human being (John 9:16), had a body (1 John 1:1), spoke normal human language(s), referred to himself as a man (John 8:40); others referred to him as a man (Acts 3:22); experienced life as a human being (Luke 2:52), including such limitations as hunger (Matt 4:2), thirst (John 19:28), tiredness (John 4:6), intense sorrow and distress (John 11:35; Luke 13:34-35), and ignorance (Mark 13:32); he had a human soul (Luke 23:46), and died (Hebrews 2:14-15).

The Deity of Christ

There are also several lines of evidence in Scripture which converge to prove that the Biblical writers regarded Jesus as human, but as more than human as well. They considered him divine. John says he was divine or God (John 1:1). Paul says he is the "very form of God" (morphe, theou; Phil 2:6) as well as our great God and savior (Titus 2:13). He is referred to as Lord (Matt 2:43-45), Yahweh (cf. Rom 10:9, 13 and Joel 2:32) as well as the King of Kings (a designation a Jew such as John would only give God himself--Rev 19:16). He does the works of God, including creating (John 1:3; Col. 1:15-20), sustaining (Heb 1:3-4), saving (Matt 1:23), raising the dead (John 5:25); judging (John 5:27), sending the Spirit (a work assigned to the father as well; see John 14:26; 15:26), and building his church (Matt 16:18). He accepts, as God himself does, worship from all men (Matt 14:33) and angels (Heb 1:6) and some day all men will bow to him (something only God accepts; Phil 2:10, Isa 45:23).

So we see that the doctrine of the simultaneous deity and humanity of Christ is not the invention of some fourth or fifth century church council (e.g., Nicaea [AD325] or Chalcedon [451]), but is clearly taught in Scripture. The precise formulation (i.e., a working model) of how this could be so may have had to await a response to the Arian heresy and other Christological developments (and a borrowing of Greek metaphysical language), but the essential features of the doctrine are found in apostolic and early church confessions.

The Incarnation & Kenosis

Jesus Christ was born of the virgin Mary (Matt 1:23; Gal 4:4) in fulfillment of Isaiah's prediction (Isa 7:14). From a more theological point of view, John says that the eternal and divine Word became flesh and that God thus "tabernacled" among us (John 1:1, 14; Exodus 40:34-35). The doctrine of the incarnation means that the second person of the Trinity took on human flesh. Jesus Christ is both undiminished deity united

with perfect humanity forever and without confusion of attributes. One person, two natures (divine/human).

God became a man in order to redeem his creation and rule over it. Thus he came to fulfill the Davidic covenant as the promised King (Luke 1:31-33). In his role as Lord and King he reveals God to men (John 1:18); saves sinners (Gal 1:4), destroys the works of the devil (1 John 3:8), judges men (Acts 17:31) and brings all things in creation back in submission to God (1 Cor 15:20-28; Ephesians 1:10-11).

There have been many errors regarding the dual nature of Christ. We will briefly mention some here. The Ebionites denied Christ's divine nature (he only received the Spirit at Baptism) as also the Arians (cf. present day Jehovah's witnesses who claim likewise that Jesus is the first and highest created being). The Gnostics (i.e., docetism), affirming that Jesus only appeared human, denied that he had a truly human nature. Nestorius denied the union of the divine and human natures in one person (the divine completely controlled the human) and Eutychianism denied any real distinction in Christ's natures at all (the human nature was engulfed in the divine resulting in a new third nature). Finally, Appolinarius denied a facet of Jesus' humanity, namely, that he had a human spirit (the divine Logos took the place of Jesus' human spirit). These are all errors in light of the Biblical data and were rightly rejected at various church councils.

Finally, there have been many attempts to explain the meaning of the term kenosis in Philippians 2:7, especially since the mid to late 1800's and the rise of psychology. It has been argued that the term kenosis refers to Christ willingly laying aside certain essential attributes such as omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence in order to redeem man. This theology in its various forms has come to be known as Kenotic Theology.¹¹ But is this what Paul is saying in Philippians 2:6, that Jesus gave up the use of or the possession of certain divine attributes? This is not likely. In fact, the apostle explains what he means when he says that Christ emptied himself by taking on the nature of a servant. Thus it is not the setting aside of any divine attributes that is being sung¹² about here in Phil 2, but rather the humiliation of the Son of God taking on human form and that "of a servant." This, of course, is the point Paul is trying to make with those in the Philippian church. They too are to live the humble lives of servants, following Christ's example.¹³

The Impeccability of Christ

In light of the true divinity and real humanity of Christ, the question arises as to whether his temptations were genuine and if it were really possible for him to have sinned. Was Christ able not to sin or not able to sin? Some say his genuine humanity includes the idea that he could have sinned. Others claim that his deity makes it impossible for him to have sinned. All evangelical scholars recognize the reality of his temptations and the fact that he did not sin, but beyond this there is not much agreement. The oft-quoted analogy of two boys attacking an aircraft carrier in their rubber dingy (using sticks and stones), where the sticks and stones represent temptation and the aircraft carrier Jesus, may go a long way in stressing Jesus' deity and impeccability, but it simply fails to catch the reality and intensity of the attacks which Satan thrust upon him (cf. Matthew 4:1-11). The bottom line in connection with this debate, however, is that Jesus was both God and man, suffered temptation victoriously (Heb 4:15), and can therefore draw near to help us in time of weakness (Heb 2:18); his temptations have given us confidence in his sympathetic heart. Beyond that we cannot know much at all. We can say that no man has ever understood the strength, viciousness, and deceit of temptation better than him and this precisely because he never gave in.

Death of Christ

All four gospels record the death of Christ (under Pontius Pilate) which is interpreted in advance by Christ himself as a death for the forgiveness of sins, the establishment of the new covenant, and the defeat of Satan (Luke 22:15-20; John 12:31; 16:11). The heart of Christ's teaching on this matter became the authoritative teaching of the apostles (in keeping with OT assertions to the same). We will talk more about the proper interpretation of the death of Christ when we discuss the doctrine of salvation. It is enough for now to realize that the evidence for his death by crucifixion is overwhelming.

The Resurrection of Christ

All four gospels record the empty tomb and the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (Matt 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20). He appeared to Mary Magdalene (John 20:11-18), to another Mary (Matt 28:1-2), to Cephas (1 Cor 15:5), to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35), to James (1 Cor 15:7), to ten disciples (Luke 24:36-43), to Thomas and the other ten disciples (John 20:26-29), to seven disciples at the Sea of Tiberias (John 21:1-14), to more than 500 people (1 Cor 15:6), to the eleven at his ascension (Matt 28:16-20; Acts 1:1-11), and finally to Paul (1 Cor 15:8). He appeared to the disciples over a course of about 40 days (Acts 1:3).

In recent times scholars have come to debunk most of the naturalistic theories (e.g., the swoon, hallucination) advanced to account for the resurrection and attending data. Virtually every scholar agrees that "something happened," and most would agree that the resurrection is the watershed issue in a biblically defined Christianity. The question that is posed most acutely, according to Gary Habermas¹⁴, is whether the kerygma (the preached message of Christ's resurrection) itself is sufficient to account for the data or whether a literal resurrection plus the kerygma is necessary to account for the data. Habermas outlines the critical answers according to four scenarios, pointing out that this is a debate not just between evangelicals and higher critics, but also between the higher critics themselves. First, there are those like Rudolph Bultmann who argue that the cause of the disciples' experience is not ascertainable; it is buried in the NT text. Second, scholars like Karl Barth and Søren Kierkegaard argued that the resurrection was literal, but that it is not subject to study since it lies outside the realm of our experience of history. It must be accepted by faith alone. The third group of scholars, including Jürgen Moltmann, argue for the literal empty tomb and a historical explanation for the disciples' change from grief to joy, but again the resurrection is an event that will only be finally vindicated/verified in the future. Fourth, there are scholars who argue that the available historical evidence suggests that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead. Wolfhart Pannenberg would be an example of this thinking, though he argues against a corporeal body in favor of a spiritual body which was recognized as Jesus and which spoke to the disciples before departing to heaven.

There is, however, no valid a priori reason for rejecting the resurrection as portrayed in scripture. It is usually one's theology of history that precludes whether resurrections happen or not. In any case, the empty tomb, the eyewitness testimony, the transformed lives of antagonists such as James and Paul, the existence of the church, the inability of the Jewish leaders to disprove the resurrection and the claims of the apostles, the early date and solid character of the claim to resurrection (1 Cor 15:3-4), as well as the solid character of surrounding evidence such as Jesus' existence, ministry, death by crucifixion, and burial. The explanation which possesses the greatest explanatory power, is the most plausible (not ad hoc), and stands the greatest chance of not being finally overturned, is that Jesus of Nazareth was actually raised from the dead and appeared to many people. His body was a physical body fit for spiritual existence and was not subject any longer to death and limitations.

The theological interpretation of Christ's bodily resurrection includes the doctrine that it is central to the Christian life and hope (1 Cor 15), that it demonstrates that he is the Son of God (Rom 1:4) and that he will someday return to judge the entire world (Acts 17:31). In the area of soteriology, the resurrection is the foundation of our regeneration and spiritual/ethical life (Rom 6:4-5; 1 Pet 1:2), our justification (Rom 4:25; Eph 2:6), our present ministry and work for the Lord (1 Cor 15:58), our hope of glorification and our eternal communion with the Father, Son and Spirit (1 Cor 15:12-28).

The Ascension & Exaltation of Christ

In Luke 24:50-53 and Acts 1:11, Luke records for us the historical fact and nature of Jesus' ascension. The language seems to imply that Jesus ascended bodily to some place in the space-time continuum, but we are unable to see or know where.

Theologically, however, Luke has made it very clear as to what the ascension means. It was not just Jesus going somewhere. Indeed, his ascension led to his exaltation to the throne and his right to rule over creation, nations and the church. He was exalted to the right hand of God (a place of power and authority) in keeping with Davidic hope (Psalm 110:1; Acts 2:34-35) and currently reigns over the universe (Eph 1:20-22a) and is head over all things pertaining to the church (Eph 1:22b-23; 1 Peter 3:22). As divine founder, leader, captain, and goal of the church he has sent the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:33) to endow her with life, love and power and will someday return to bring her to be where he is, and to subject all things in heaven and earth to his Lordship. He has received, and continues to receive, glory, praise, and honor in light of who he is and what he has done (Rev 5:12). Every knee should bow before God's Christ, the exalted Lord of the universe. Someday, all will (Phil 2:9)!

The Return of Christ

The Bible predicts that someday Jesus Christ will return, suddenly, bodily and with great glory for all to see (Matt 24:30; Rev 19:11ff). At that time he will judge Satan and his angels, the living and the dead, and will establish his kingdom in its fullest sense. We will discuss the nature and timing of the rapture as well as the nature of the kingdom under Eschatology.

The States of Christ

It has been common among Reformed and other systematic theologians to speak of the two states of Christ: (1) humiliation, and (2) exaltation. Therefore, although we have covered some of the details already, we nonetheless survey them again in these terms. This will help to equip the student for further reading where these ideas will undoubtedly be discussed. "Christ's humiliation refers to his (1) incarnation; (2) suffering; (3) death, and (4) burial. His exaltation also contains four aspects: (1) resurrection; (2) ascension; (3) session (his being seated at God's right hand, and (4) return in glory.

The incarnation of the second person of the Trinity, while not involving the "giving up" of any divine attributes, entailed Christ's willing submission to the limitations and weaknesses of humanity, being actually found as a servant among men. His suffering in terms of spiritual hardship, physical deprivation, and emotional pain are all part of his sufferings in humiliation. Jesus' humiliation was furthered heightened by the enormous suffering of an unjust, cruel, and ignoble death, bearing the sin of a cursed humanity on a cross. Though he probably did not descend into Hell, he nonetheless was dead for three days. From the time of the stable in Bethlehem until his death, he underwent humiliation in obedience to his Father for the salvation of the elect and the redemption of the cosmos.

Jesus' resurrection into a permanent physical body perfectly equipped for spiritual life is the turning point in his humiliation. It is here that he is vindicated and his defeat of all his enemies is secured. He received glory at his ascension and the right to rule as is demonstrated by his sitting at the right hand of God in fulfillment of Psalm 110:1 (Acts 2:34-36). Though the world awaits the final stage in the completion of Christ's vindication, and the salvation and judgment of the world, Christ will someday return bodily (Acts 1:11) and destroy all his enemies, including death. He will complete the final stage of his exaltation over all things.¹⁵

The Three Offices of Christ

While there were early church fathers who spoke about different offices of Christ, it was John Calvin in his Institutes (2.15) who systematized the idea of the threefold office of Christ: (1) Prophet; (2) Priest, and (3) King.

In Deuteronomy 18:18 Moses predicted that God would send another prophet like him to the people of Israel. Both John and Peter understood Jesus to be that one (John 6:14; 7:40; Acts 3:22-24; see also Matt 13:57, John 4:44). The title of "prophet," however, is not found in the epistles. Nonetheless, it is clear that Christ functioned as the consummate prophet--one who both gave revelation from God (forthtelling and foretelling) and was himself the quintessential revelation from God (John 1:18). In this way he is unlike other prophets--a fact which may account for the conspicuous absence of this title from the epistles.

Jesus Christ also functioned in the office of priest. While the prophet was God's representative to the people, the priest was the peoples' representative before God. But in contrast to priests in the Levitical order, Jesus did not offer any animal sacrifice for our sin, he offered himself, an unblemished lamb of eternal worth. As a priest he has entered the holy of holies, not the copy on earth in the temple, but the heavenly place and is able to lead us, therefore, into the presence of God--a distinctly priestly function. He does not just enter the holy of holies once a year, but indeed he lives there forever now. Finally, both Romans 8:34 and Hebrews 7:25 teach us that his priestly role continues even now as he "ever lives to make intercession" for us in our weakness!

Finally, Jesus Christ fulfilled the office of King. But in contrast to the greatest of Israelite kings, i.e., David, Christ rules over the entire world, indeed the universe, including the church (Eph 1:20-23). He is the consummate king who rules wisely, attentively and with final authority and justice (Ps 2:8-9). In short, he rules as the God-man over the entire cosmos and when he returns he will deal definitively with all hindrances and obstacles to his deserved reign. At that time he will be called "the King of Kings" (Rev 19:16).

11 See S. M. Smith, "Kenosis, Kenotic Theology," in Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 600-602. These speculative theories of the incarnation have little to do with the exegesis of Philippians 2:7. See also B. E. Foster, "Kenoticism," in New Dictionary of Theology, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J. I. Packer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 364.

12 This section in Philippians (i.e., 2:6-11) may well have been an early hymn. This too should prevent us from drawing too much theologically from these statements for they are not reasoned theology per se, but instead the worshipful cry of the heart to God--the theology of which was undoubtedly well known in the

community(ies) in which it came to expression, but which are to some degree lost on us today.

13 For further discussion about the incoherence charge often leveled at the doctrine of the incarnation and possible solutions in modified "kenoticism" or the "two minds" model, see Thomas D. Senior, "Incarnation and the Trinity," in *Reason for the Hope Within*, ed. Michael J. Murray (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 238-260.

14 See Gary Habermas, "Resurrection of Christ," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 938-41.

15 See Wayne A. Grudem, "States of Jesus Christ," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 1052-54; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 2nd rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 331-355.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/greg-herrick/christology-jesus-christ/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net