

The Person of Jesus Christ: The Essentiality of His Nature within Christianity

Abstract:

Within this article attention will be given to the theological concept of the person (nature) of Jesus Christ and its role within Christianity. In proposing that belief in and about Jesus Christ is foundational to the heart of Christianity, it is also held that a consensual/unitive belief is necessary within the Christian faith. This belief is based in the recognition that the person of Jesus Christ is interrelated with the atoning work of Jesus Christ and as such functions to essentially define what qualifies as authentic Christianity. This said, it is then held that it is important for individuals to not only possess and/or seek a correct understanding about the person of Jesus Christ, but also comprehend the various beliefs which pertain to His nature from a Christian viewpoint(s) and alternate/opposing viewpoint(s). When this occurs, individuals are then able to distinguish what constitutes right beliefs concerning the person of Jesus Christ which in turn promotes spiritual growth and the progression of the gospel.

Keywords: christology, person of Christ, nature, human, divine, soteriology, work of Christ, church, belief and/or consensual belief, unity and diversity, heresies

Introduction

The goal of this paper will be to show that at the heart of Christianity is the belief in and about Jesus Christ. Thus, in order to define and preserve authentic Christianity, a consensual belief must be held concerning the person (nature) of Christ as it relates to the subsequent atoning, redemptive work of Christ. The first section of this paper will address the question 'Does Christianity present a core differential element which serves to define authentic Christianity and if so, how does it relate to the person of Jesus Christ?' This will then be proceeded by a general overview concerning the person of Jesus Christ and the identification of the various beliefs which pertain to His nature from a Christian viewpoint(s) and alternate/opposing viewpoint(s). Next, one will be presented with the necessity of identifying a unitive Christian belief as it relates to the understanding of the person of Jesus Christ, showing in conclusion the

essentiality of an authentic and unitive Christian belief concerning the person of Jesus Christ as it correlates to and influences the atoning work of Christ.

Defining Christianity

Concerning the religion of Christianity, one must address the question of what constitutes an individual and/or a group of people as 'Christian' so to ascertain a basic understanding of Christianity and provide a means of identifying authentic Christianity. In an attempt to respond to the said question, it is necessary to recognize Christianity as unique among the various religions of the world¹ due to the fact that individuals know God as the One revealed in Jesus Christ.² This may be identified in the totality of Christian theology being based in the centrality of Christ and His nature³ as 'the meaning of Christianity is undecipherable without grasping the meaning of Christ's life, death and living presence.'⁴ Thus, denoting the manner in which Christianity derives its name, mission, identity, purpose and very life from Christ.⁵

From the above, a vital core element for Christianity may be established - the person of Jesus Christ. This is exhibited by the fact that 'Christianity is Christ'⁶ and is revealed in the necessary affirmation and/or belief that 'Jesus Christ is God and Savior.'⁷ Therefore, demonstrating how 'the essentiality of believing rightly about him is absolutely crucial to preserving authentic Christianity.'⁸ However, in order to construct orthodox beliefs concerning the person of Christ one must inquire as to who the person of Christ is as it specifically relates to His nature.⁹

¹ Larry D. Hart, *Truth Aflame: Theology for the Church in Renewal* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), p. 311.

² Thomas C. Oden, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), p. 214.

³ Hart, p. 286.

⁴ Oden, p. 213.

⁵ Oden, p. 213.

⁶ Roger E. Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity & Diversity* (Downers Grove: IL, InterVarsity Press, 2002), p. 221.

⁷ Oden, p. 224.

⁸ Oden, p. 221.

⁹ Hart, p. 281.

General Overview of the Person (Nature) of Jesus Christ

The inquiry into the person (nature(s)) of Jesus Christ has historically been a center of debate as it examines if credible evidence can be set forth to exhibit Jesus Christ as the person He attested Himself to be – ‘the One and Only God become fully human...personally uniting two distinct natures, human and divine.’¹⁰ This is demonstrated by the questions concerning the nature of Christ appearing in the gospel reports of Jesus, which were first posed by religious leaders, second by civil authorities, third by the populace and fourth by Jesus Himself to His inner circle.¹¹ Such inquiries influenced the earliest Christian explainers/church fathers who first faced doubt concerning Christ’s true humanity and later His true deity, which subsequently progressed to those in modern times by presenting issues pertaining to belief in Christ’s deity.¹²

The Christian Consensus (Belief) about Jesus Christ

During the fourth and fifth centuries, multiple ecumenical councils were held concerning the person of Jesus Christ in an effort to formulate a unitive belief and oppose the heresies rising at that time.¹³ The Council of Chalcedon (451 AD), developed such a belief which resulted in the culmination of a long controversy and the establishment of an orthodox statement for all Christians regarding Christology.¹⁴ The Chalcedon Definition, drawing from divine revelation and the writings of influential Church fathers such as Tertullian, Origin, Cyril and Augustine of Hippo presents the doctrine of the *hypostatic union*¹⁵ wherein the person of Jesus Christ was defined as consisting of ‘two distinct natures, divine and human...clearly distinguishable and substantially different...yet undivided, inseparable, and unconfused’¹⁶. This resulted in affirming Jesus as the ‘one person of the Son of God, the Logos who became human in the incarnation through the Holy Spirit’¹⁷ and presented the belief ‘in a perfect union of two

¹⁰ Oden, p. 234.

¹¹ Oden, pp. 233-234; Luke 5:2, 9:9; Matthew 21:11; Mark 8:29, NASB.

¹² Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 225.

¹³ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 225.

¹⁴ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 226.

¹⁵ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, pp. 229-230; John H. Leith, ed. *Creeds of the Church: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present* (rev. ed. Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1973), pp. 35-36; Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition & Reform* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), pp. 218, 222 and 233; Augustine of Hippo, *Faith, Hope and Charity (Enchiridion)* (trans. Louis A. Arand, Westminster, MD: Newman, 1963), p. 43; Mark 15:39; Philippians 2:6-11, NASB.

¹⁶ Oden, p. 299.

¹⁷ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 227.

distinct, but never separate natures - one human and one divine - in one integral, eternal divine person'¹⁸ wherein Jesus Christ is perceived as 'two whats and one who.'¹⁹

The above belief became widely accepted as the Christian consensus by all professing Christians (Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and the majority of Protestants) for more than fifteen hundred years, despite questions raised concerning the language and conceptuality of the Chalcedon Definition.²⁰ This occurred due to the general recognition that Christ's personhood is singularly unified, yet in a 'union of humanness and deity'²¹ and only in existence in 'one distinct person in whom there is an intimate and perpetual conjunction of ... two natures in one individual, wherein the human nature was assumed by the logos so as to be the Word in person (*enhypostatos logo*)'²². With this said, it may then be observed that the Chalcedon Definition essentially functioned to establish 'four fences' and/or borders which serve to not only identify and guard against¹ the major tendencies of heretical distortion (either inordinarily divinize the human nature, humanize the divine nature and/or dualize the person), but also provides a means of diversity within the unity of the consensual belief.²³ This was accomplished by the Chalcedonian Definition defining the doctrine of the person of Christ (*hypostatic union*) as: 1) 'unconfused (*asunkutos*), with no mixing of the two natures, which remain distinct even while they are in communion,'²⁴ 2) 'unchanged (*atreptos*), in the sense that the deity is not transmuted into humanity, nor humanity into deity,'²⁵ 3) 'indivisible (*adiaretos*), unable to be divided - the personal union is never at any point split apart'²⁶ and 4) 'inseparable (*achoristos*), undissolved through eternity, perpetual'²⁷.

¹⁸ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 227.

¹⁹ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 227.

²⁰ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 226 and 231.

²¹ Oden, p. 302.

²² Oden, p. 306.

²³ Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, pp. 233-234; Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 238; Oden, p. 306.

²⁴ Oden, p. 313.

²⁵ Oden, p. 313.

²⁶ Oden, p. 313.

²⁷ Oden, p. 313.

Alternate/Opposing Views about Jesus Christ

Concerning the history of Christian theology, it may be identified as ‘in large part a history of heresies because Jesus and the claims he made, as well as the claims his disciples made about him, seem to be incredible.’²⁸ In light of this recognition, the challenge of orthodoxy is placed in its most constructive and judicial perspective as one examines the heretical developments/distortions which have developed within the church.²⁹ Six main Christological heresies arose in the early centuries of Christian history and have continued to reappear; however, are seldom promoted as such due to the lack of utilizing the (heretical) names given by Christian theologians.³⁰ Thus, it is helpful to recognize the given names as each arose during the first four centuries of Christian history and contributed to the need of a unified response by Christian thinkers and leaders.³¹

Docetism

The first heresy, Docetism originated in and was promoted by Gnostics who were present within the church.³² Presenting itself as more of a broad cultural trend than that of a specific movement,³³ Docetism, much like Gnosticism holds the view that the material dimension and/or matter is innately and intrinsically evil and thus, the heavenly redeemer could not be combined with matter³⁴. However, in contrast Docetism asserts that ‘Christ’s human body was a phantasm, and that his sufferings and death were mere appearance’³⁵ thus ‘if he suffered he was not God; if he was God he did not suffer’³⁶; whereas, Gnosticism views Christ as only spiritual in which He only appeared as human and fleshly.³⁷ Additionally, those more sophisticated within Docetism may also hold a dualist Christological view which places a strong distinction between Christ – a heavenly, spiritual redeemer and Jesus - a human instrument taken over by Christ.³⁸ Therefore, by

²⁸ Harold O. J. Brown, *Heresies: The Image of Christ in the Mirror of Heresy and Orthodoxy from the Apostles to the Present* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), p. xxiii.

²⁹ Hart, p. 320.

³⁰ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 232.

³¹ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 232.

³² Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 232.

³³ Millard J. Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991), p. 47.

³⁴ Hart, p. 321; Oden, p. 280.

³⁵ Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, *Documents of the Christian Church* (4th ed. Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 37.

³⁶ Bettenson & Maunder, p. 37. This concept suggests Christ pretended to possess human frailties and experience temptation.

³⁷ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 232.

³⁸ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 232.

rejecting Christ's humanity as not fully in the flesh and by spiritualizing incarnation all docetists denied full and true incarnation of Jesus Christ.³⁹ This form of heresy still exists within Christianity, particularly in folk religion and theology, wherein many Christians are misguided in their belief and hold that if Jesus Christ truly was God, then He would not be able to really suffer and/or be tempted and that He must have continually experienced omnipotency and omniscience through His life.⁴⁰

Adoptionism

The second heresy to challenge orthodox Christology was Adoptionism. Opposite of Docetism, Adoptionism believes that Jesus Christ was only (a very special) human – one who was adopted by God to be His special prophet and son.⁴¹ Jesus Christ's uniqueness as it relates to God and the denial of His ontological deity (equality with the being of God) was a key characteristic shared by all adoptionists and resulted not only in the rejection of the deity/divinity of Christ, but also the doctrine of two natures.⁴² Proceeding from the classic views of adoptionism, a modern form may be recognized as reflecting the tradition following Schleiermacher, wherein 'Christology begins not with the preexistent Logos, but with a present experience of the new life as immediately dependent upon Jesus' consciousness of God'⁴³ wherein 'by taking us up into the energies of God-consciousness, he reconciles, saves, and brings persons into vital union with God'⁴⁴.

Arianism

The third heresy challenging orthodox Christology is the major heretical view of Arianism, which presents itself as no more than a sophisticated form of Adoptionism wherein it is believed that Christ's origin is prior to birth and 'that Christ was God's first and greatest creation but not God or equal with God.'⁴⁵ This said, Arianism presents the same weaknesses as Adoptionism and rejects Christ's divinity for the view of Christ as creature rather than eternal, thus making 'Jesus more than human, but less than fully God or in other words a

³⁹ Oden, 313; Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 232-233.

⁴⁰ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 233.

⁴¹ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 233.

⁴² Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 234.

⁴³ Oden, p. 345.

⁴⁴ Oden, p. 345.

⁴⁵ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 235.

demigod.⁴⁶ A form of Arianism may still be found in modern Jehovah's Witnesses (The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society) as they confess the similar beliefs.⁴⁷

Apollinarianism

The fourth heresy, Apollinarianism, is a heresy that originated from the controversy concerning the thought about Jesus Christ two patterns (natures).⁴⁸ This view, based in the teaching of Apollinarius emphasizes the divinity of Jesus Christ at the expense of His humanity⁴⁹ through the denial of Jesus Christ's human rational soul (*nous*) and the replacement of it 'with the Logos'⁵⁰ resulting in the rejection of Christ's humanity⁵¹. A modern form similar to Apollinarianism is often the default of Christology for untutored Christians as it can be challenging to think of Jesus Christ as 'a divine being who reveals himself in human form.'⁵²

Nestorianism

The fifth heresy, Nestorianism was considered to be a new sophisticated, Trinitarian-based form of adoptionism wherein it asserted two distinct persons in moral union with one another⁵³ in which the separation/distinction of the two persons was based in the human nature's ability to be conceived and born of Mary⁵⁴. Thus, resulting in the rejection of Christ's personal union, through the separation of Christ as two persons⁵⁵ wherein the belief in the divinity of the Logos is to resist any attribution to Him of creatural characteristics/experiences⁵⁶. A modern form of Nestorianism may still be recognized today among certain liberal Protestant theologies.⁵⁷

⁴⁶ Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh*, p. 58.

⁴⁷ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 235.

⁴⁸ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 236.

⁴⁹ Bettenson and Maunder, p. 47.

⁵⁰ Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, p. 207.

⁵¹ Oden, p. 313.

⁵² Brown, p. 170.

⁵³ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, pp. 236-237.

⁵⁴ Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, p. 213.

⁵⁵ Oden, pp. 313-314.

⁵⁶ Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, p. 213.

⁵⁷ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 237.

Eutychianism and/or Monophysitism

The sixth and final heresy, Eutychianism and/or Monophysitism developed in response to Nestorianism wherein those appalled by the Nestorian denial of the unity of the person of Christ began to emphasize in a one-sided argument the denial that Jesus Christ could possess two full, complete natures.⁵⁸ Therefore, rejecting Christ's humanity and divinity they presented Jesus Christ as possessing a single mixed nature⁵⁹ in which Christ's humanity was engulfed by His divinity.⁶⁰ Monophysitism, along with Nestorianism may be identified today as existing in certain Middle East regions mostly under Muslim rule.⁶¹

Diversity within the Christian Consensus (Belief)

From the Chalcedonian Definition's unifying belief, the establishment of the 'four fences' and biblical revelation, Christianity is presented with the ability to exhibit diversity within the unitive consensus so long as the full nature of Christ's deity or humanity is not denied, the 'person' of Christ is not divided into two persons or described as a hybrid of two natures.⁶² Examples of such diversity may be identified in, but not limited to: 1) Reformed theologians who propose that the man Jesus (post resurrection and ascension) is 'bodily located in heaven and is not omnipresent except through the Holy Spirit who is the Spirit of Christ making him present with all,'⁶³ 2) Protestant theologians who present a kenotic Christology which includes any models of the person of Christ that possess a basic Chalcedonian framework and 'then explains the coexistence of two natures in Christ by referring to a self-limitation of the Son of God's divine nature'⁶⁴ through the voluntary laying aside of His 'conscious awareness and use of attributes of glory,'⁶⁵ 3) two-minds and/or two conscious thinkers who deny 'any limitations of knowledge or power in Jesus Christ'⁶⁶ and attach 'two wills and two consciousness to his single personhood,'⁶⁷ 4) liberation Christology thinkers

⁵⁸ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 237.

⁵⁹ Oden, pp. 313-314.

⁶⁰ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 238.

⁶¹ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 238.

⁶² Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 238.

⁶³ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, pp. 238-239.

⁶⁴ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 239.

⁶⁵ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 240.

⁶⁶ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 239.

⁶⁷ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, pp. 239-240.

who propose 'Christ as liberator of the poor and oppressed'⁶⁸ and 5) revelation Christology thinkers who propose 'Christ as full revealer of the heart and mind of God'⁶⁹. Nevertheless, caution is to be utilized in the formation and/or acceptance of any and all diversity as each must be examined in light of biblical revelation and the Chalcedon Definition, in order to not become substitutes for and/or heresies against the orthodox, consensual Christology.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 241.

⁶⁹ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 241.

⁷⁰ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 241.

The Necessity of Establishing a Unitive Christian Belief of the Person of Jesus Christ

From the above, one may determine that the basic, universal Christian belief concerning the person of Jesus Christ can be summarized in the following manner: ‘Jesus Christ as God incarnate; one unified person – the eternal Son of God equal with the father; of two distinct, but never separate natures, human and divine.’⁷¹ However, in order to understand the need of determining such a belief, the underlying concern of said belief must be identified. This was recognized ‘when the early church fathers debated the doctrine of the person of Christ and sought to construct a unifying belief about his deity and humanity (incarnation) as they were primarily concerned to protect the reality of salvation through Christ’⁷² as salvation itself is made possible due to the (divine-human) nature of Christ (theandric union)⁷³. Therefore, presenting the person and work of Christ as an indissoluble unity,⁷⁴ wherein the good news (*euaggelion*, gospel) of human salvation serves to summarize and unite the person and work of Jesus Christ⁷⁵ in which He is both source and subject⁷⁶ as may be seen/recognized in ‘the person of the Son [who is] engaged in the work of the servant-messiah.’⁷⁷

It is then through the Son’s engagement in the work of the servant-messiah that one may recognize that the mediation of human salvation (atonement) occurs as ‘the mediator between God and humanity would have to be nothing less than God and nothing less than fully human’⁷⁸ to accomplish said work since if the person of Jesus Christ is lacking in any aspect of divine or human nature the Mediator’s work cannot be completed due to the requirement of the ‘co-willing and co-working of the two natures’⁷⁹ through ‘cooperative permeation or interpenetration’⁸⁰. This may be identified in that the Mediator must possess the capability to empathize with ordinary humanity and yet be of equal divinity wherein ‘as human, he is capable of making intercession and sacrificial offering for humanity; as divine Son his act of sacrificial offering has infinite value to the

⁷¹ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 241.

⁷² Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 243.

⁷³ Oden, pp. 224, 302.

⁷⁴ Hart, p. 280.

⁷⁵ Oden, p. 220.

⁷⁶ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985), pp. 1036 and 1059-1067.

⁷⁷ Oden, p. 220.

⁷⁸ Oden, p. 278.

⁷⁹ Oden, p. 315.

⁸⁰ Oden, p. 315; cf. John 5:36, NASB.

Father.⁸¹ Thomas Oden fittingly summarizes the above noted relationship of the person of Jesus Christ and His work in the following manner:

Nothing proceeds rightly in setting forth the work of Christ unless the unique Person doing the work is first properly identified. Every person is unique. But the person of Jesus Christ is unique in a way that is utterly distinguishable from all other unique persons, since without ceasing to be human, this person is God in the flesh. The work done by Jesus Christ could not have been completed by any other Person than one distinctly capable of mediating the alienated relationship between deity and humanity. To reconcile that relationship, one must have personal credentials in both ordinary humanity and true divinity. The reconciler must have standing with humanity and have standing with God.⁸²

Thus, it may be seen that if one is to truly grasp the Christology of the New Testament one must acknowledge the core of Christianity as it concerns the ‘person’ of Christ and the accomplishment of His work⁸³ because ‘just as “Christianity is Christ,” so also “Christianity is the gospel of Christ as Savior”⁸⁴ and therefore cannot be viewed or understood apart from one another⁸⁵.

Conclusion

From the above it may be recognized that the person of Jesus Christ is central to Christianity as the consensual belief concerning the person (nature) of Jesus Christ affirms the atoning and redemptive work of Christ. Due to the unique presence of both the divine and human natures within the one person, the means constitute the manner in which salvation for humanity is accomplished.

Application to the Contemporary Church

Concerning the application of the subject matter addressed above, individuals must ask the following questions: ‘What impact does and/or should this doctrine have on the life of the Church?’ and ‘How does and/or should this doctrine affect one’s theological outlook, attitude, and conduct?’ In answering the said questions, it must be observed that the person of Jesus Christ is in essence

⁸¹ Oden, p. 316; cf. Philippians 2:6-11; Hebrews 2:17-18, 4:15, NASB.

⁸² Oden, pp. 233-244.

⁸³ Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (trans Shirley C. Guthrie and Charles A.M. Hall, rev. ed., Philadelphia: IL Westminster, 1963), pp. 236 and 310-311.

⁸⁴ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 243.

⁸⁵ Oden, p. 227.

Christianity wherein He serves as the foundation of the religion.⁸⁶ Due to this observation, Jesus Christ and the consensual belief concerning His person should subsequently impact all aspects of church and one's life as He is the divine Logos who assumed human nature so as to personally unite deity and humanity in Christ for the redemption of all humanity.⁸⁷ The Christology presented above should serve a central place in the church's life since Jesus is the source and subject of the gospel which is in turn the heart of the church's ministry⁸⁸ as 'from Jesus Christ we learn not only the will and character of God but also our own humanity'⁸⁹ wherein the knowledge of Jesus Christ should permeate one's life in all manners.

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⁸⁶ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, pp. 221-242.

⁸⁷ Oden, p. 231.

⁸⁸ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, pp. 1059-1069.

⁸⁹ Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, p. 242.