

Lecture 4. Christology of John & the Early Church: Part I

This lecture, along with the next, will examine the developments in thinking about Jesus that took place in the first seven centuries of the Church. This was a period of particularly intense reflection on the identity of Christ. This lecture will examine first the Christology of the Gospel of John, and then look at the continued Christological developments of the early patristic fathers through Irenaeus.

I. Johannine Christology: The Gospel of John is different in tone, structure, and perspective from the Synoptic Gospels. The Gospel of John is perhaps the most "Christological" of all the gospels - a more explicit focus on the person of Jesus. The Gospel and three Letters of John reflect a tradition and community with a complex and troubled history - the Beloved Disciple is the hero of the community.

The Prologue to the Gospel (John 1:1-18): The focus is the Word (Logos) of God. John 1:14 - the incarnation - sets the Jesus story in eternity. The Word was with God (pros ton theon) And was God - the foreshadowing of conflict with his own - Jesus as the very revelation of the Father.

The greatest emphasis is on the exalted status of Jesus: Jesus knows all things (see John 6:6) This is evident in the Passion with the statement, "It is finished," the account of which is found only in John 19:30. Use of symbols to articulate dimensions of the mystery of Jesus - culminating in Ego Eimi: "I Am"

Jesus was remembered as exhibiting love in what he did and who was deeply loved by those who followed him (e.g., "You are my friends," in John 15:14). Jesus is the Messiah and Son who comes from above - the importance of knowing Jesus' true origins.

II. Unity and Diversity in New Testament Christology: Pluralism among the New Testament portraits of Jesus: Five common claims about Jesus in the New Testament from Frank Matera: Each New Testament Christology presents Jesus as the Messiah of Israel. Jesus is presented in a close, though tension-filled, relationship with the people of Israel. Each New Testament Christology relates the person and work of Jesus to both the Church and the world. Jesus is presented as one who brings salvation from God to a human family that is in a dire predicament. Each New Testament Christology speaks of Jesus' unique relationship with God. - Frank Matera, *New Testament Theology*, 243-255.

III. Christological Development in the Early Church: We see the movement of the Church through centuries of great expansion, periods of persecution, up to

becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century. The enculturation of the gospel.

Controversies about the most appropriate way to conceive and speak of Jesus - which are ultimately issues of how to interpret the Scriptures. The experience of salvation from God in and through Jesus. "Having experienced through [Christ] the forgiveness of sins, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and a new life of grace in community, Christians asked themselves: what questions does this experience raise about Jesus, his being and his identity?" - Gerald O'Collins, *Christology*, 159-160. The influence of the prayer of early Christians - *Lex orandi, Lex credendi*

The major Christological issues: The divinity of Christ, The integrity, or completeness, of Christ's humanity, How to speak of the union of humanity and divinity of Christ.

Faulty viewpoints that arose: Adoptionism: Jesus was a man in whom the Spirit of God dwelt and who was elected or adopted by God and endowed with full dominion. Does not allow for a real incarnation. Docetism (dokein, "to seem, to appear"): Jesus only appeared to be human, he only appeared to suffer. Ignatius of Antioch (early second century) opposes Docetism. Gnosticism: The creation of the world is the result of a fall, a flaw in a premundane world of pure spirits. Salvation is through knowledge (gnosis); it is salvation from the world.

Irenaeus of Lyon (died early third century) held that the God of redemption is the God of creation (against Gnosticism). The Word and the Spirit are the "hands" of God in creation and revelation. Salvation had to come both from the "side" of humanity and the "side" of God. Recapitulation (Ephesians 1:10): Christ is the New Adam who sums up in himself the whole sequence of human history, sanctifying it and inaugurating a new, redeemed race of people. The obedience of Christ, the New Adam, undoes the disobedience of the First Adam. This Christology closely connects God with humanity and human history and envisions salvation as the gift of a share in the life of God.

Reflection Questions

1. Read John 1:1-18. What does the Johannine Prologue tell you about the person and saving work of Jesus Christ?
2. Read John 19:17-37. How does this Gospel's account of the death of Jesus compare with the accounts in Mark, Matthew, and Luke? What insights for faith does it disclose?

3. Do you resonate with the five claims about Jesus that Matera identifies as common to the Christologies of the New Testament? Are there other Christological claims that should be included?

4. Early Christian theologians had to confront tendencies to abbreviate, or even nullify, the humanity of Jesus. Why have Christians through the centuries struggled to affirm Jesus' true humanity? Why is the affirmation of Jesus' humanity important for Christian faith?