

## Chapter 2:

# Our Concepts of Christ

**T**he beliefs we hold about the nature and work of Jesus characterize what we are as Christians more than any other area of doctrinal inquiry. “Who and what was Jesus of Nazareth?” is certainly one of the most critical questions upon which our entire faith structure rests. The question was first asked by those persons who witnessed the miraculous and prophetic activities in his life. “Who is this that teaches with authority?” (Mark 1:27) “Who is this that forgives sins.” (Mark 2:27) “What manner of man is this that even the winds and sea obey him?” (Mark 4:4) Later, it was asked of the disciples by Jesus himself, “Who do you say that I am?” (Mark 8:27) Then, at his trial before Jewish authorities, the High Priest asked again, “Who is he?” (Mark 14:62) And, throughout history, it has been asked regularly by most Christians and many non-Christians. The perpetual posing of this same question is not surprising because the very purpose of God’s appearance on earth as the Christ was to be the object of our inquiry. There can be no real encounter with Jesus unless the question of who he is is faced squarely.

Who, then, is Jesus? The traditional answer is “Jesus is the Christ”

and the purpose of many doctrines of Christ is to give clarity to this historical affirmation of the Christian faith. In scripture, Jesus is called many things: Christ, Son of God, Son of Man, Lord, Logos, Rabbi, Prophet, King, High Priest, etc. And, throughout history, he has acquired several more titles: moral teacher, religious genius, deluded fanatic, second Adam, Lamb of God, etc.

To help sort out some of our beliefs about Christ, it is helpful to look, at least, at the titles “Christ,” “Logos,” “Lord,” and “Saviour.” Each of these terms deals with Christ as an object of faith more than as an object of historical inquiry.

“Christ” is from the Greek form of the Hebrew word, “Messiah,” which means “The anointed one.” The concept of an expected Messiah is deeply rooted in Hebrew religious thought. The Jewish community expected a kingly leader of the House of David who, as God’s agent, would lead Israel to her destiny as the chosen nation. But, in the very unkingly life and death of Jesus, the concept of messiah shifted to a more supernatural one. Then, as Christianity spread more and more among gentiles, the title “Jesus the Christ” gradually became a proper name, “Jesus Christ,” and the concept of Jesus as the messiah receded into the background.

“Logos” is the Greek word for “reason,” and in the early Church, it came to be used specifically as the name for the mind of God, which was embodied in Jesus Christ. In the Gospel of John, “logos” is translated as “word.” “The word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14) Or, “The mind of God became a graceful, truthful man who dwelt among us.” The preexistent logos, which was part of the total substance of God, became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. Therefore, Jesus Christ was necessarily of the same substance as God the Father.

While “Messiah” was how the early Jewish Christians identified him, and “logos” was how the early theologians identified him, the rank and file gentile Christians turned to the titles “Lord” and “Son of God” to express their belief in the nature of Jesus. “Lord” comes from the Old Testament where it is used as a word for God. As the understanding grew that God had been, in some way, “in Jesus Christ,” the title “Lord” became more widely used. Today, “Lord” is probably the

most common title used along with Jesus Christ. “Our Lord, Jesus Christ,” “The Lord’s Supper,” The Lord’s Prayer,” “The Lord’s Day,” “Jesus Christ is Lord!”

Each of the preceding titles for Jesus emphasizes his nature by focusing on “what he was” rather than emphasizing “what he did.” In contrast, the title “savior” summarizes all that he did in his life and death. Jesus came to save us, lived to save us, and died to save us.

“Jesus Christ is lord and savior,” in its simplest form, is the universal confession of the Christian faith. The two terms “savior” and “Lord” affirm much the same kind of dual nature in Christ that we affirm in God. They also reflect both sides of our relationship to Christ. On the one side, he is our savior to whom we are grateful. On the other, he is our lord to whom we are obedient. What we believe about being a Christian is reflected in the degree to which we emphasize Jesus Christ as either the “savior” of our lives (which is an inward and personal relationship between us and Christ) or the “lord” of our lives (which demands an outward and active relationship between us and others).

## **Incarnation and Atonement**

Probably the two most important doctrines of the Christian faith are the concepts of *Incarnation* and *Atonement*. The Incarnation affirms that God became flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The Atonement affirms that the restoration of the broken relationship between God and humans was made possible in the life and death of Jesus Christ. Both ideas are complex, both are somewhat mysterious, and both have engendered a variety of interpretations over the 2,000 years of Christian history.

So much reflective activity has surrounded these two concepts that two whole sub-units of theology have been developed: “Christology,” which deals with the nature of Christ as focused in the Incarnation and “Soteriology,” which deals with the saving work of Christ as focused in the Atonement. However, these are only arbitrary divisions. It is obviously impossible to separate what Christ was (Christology) from what Christ did (Soteriology). Some have summed this up by saying,

“Christ was what he did, and he did what he was.”

The twin doctrines of Incarnation and Atonement are of critical importance, and what we believe about them characterizes what we are as Christians more than any other doctrines. Whole branches of Christendom are set aside from one another because of specific emphases relating to one or the other of these two concepts. Most of our specific practices as Christians (baptism, communion, worship, confirmation, evangelism, ministry, etc.) are ultimately defined in terms of our Christological and Soteriological beliefs.

## Incarnation—God Became Flesh

The *Incarnation*, God’s becoming flesh in Jesus Christ, was the most important event in world history. Even our system of dates is divided into the period of time before this event (B.C.) and the time after (A.D.) The affirmation that God so loved the world that God came in the form of a man for our benefit is the declaration of Christians the world over.

Incarnation, or “God becoming flesh,” is not a specifically Christian concept. Several eastern religions have beliefs in Gods which came to earth and assumed human form. However, in Christianity, the concept has taken on meaning which uniquely sets us aside from other faiths. We affirm that there is only one God who became incarnate in only one man, Jesus, to reveal to us both God’s actual nature and our potential nature.

This dual purpose of the Incarnation is, for many Christians, the critical doctrine on which many other ideas hinge. From the Creation on, God tried a variety of ways of expressing the totality of God’s love for us. God expressed God’s nature through covenants with the Patriarchs and announcements through the Prophets. But, God’s people still failed to understand and turned away. Then, God chose a once-and-for-all-time way to show us both (1) God’s nature of total love and (2) our potential to be like God. God entered in a man—in a form we could easily understand—to show us God’s love and what God wants us to become.

This dual purpose is reflected in another uniquely Christian idea

that the incarnate Christ was both fully human and fully divine, both completely God and completely man. That these two natures (divine and human) would exist at the same time without one nature limiting or changing the other is another of the great paradoxes in Christian doctrine.

The classic Christian concept of Incarnation was the subject of much debate in the early church particularly during the period between the two great councils of church leaders held at Nicea (325) and at Chalcedon (451). At the latter council, it was finally affirmed that Jesus Christ was one person “in two natures without confusion, without change, without division, without separation, the distinction of the natures by no means being annulled through the union, but rather the distinctive character of each nature being preserved.”

Even though this definition of the incarnate lord has been generally accepted across Christendom, the definition fails to explain how the dual natures could exist in one person. Consequently, Christians tend, in actual belief to lean toward one nature at the expense of the other.

Some of us over emphasize the divine nature of Christ. We imply that he only *seemed* to have human limitations and that his suffering and physical attributes were only apparent. He was God *disguised* as a human being. The picture we have of Jesus in John’s Gospel leans in this direction as did the writings of the 2nd and 3rd Century Gnostic heretics.

Others of us tend to affirm Jesus as a deified man, a prophet and teacher who had all the limitations of other humans but who had a special inspiration, a holy dignity, a godlike quality which set him aside as a unique human being. The picture of Jesus in Mark’s Gospel leans toward this overly human nature and much modern scholarship assumes this as the more realistic probability.

Of the two natures, the human nature of Christ is most widely affirmed and needs little proof. Virtually all historians accept the fact that a prophetic teacher named Jesus lived at some time during the Roman occupation of Palestine. There is ample evidence that he was the leader of a small group of disciples and that he was tried and executed by the combined authority of the Jewish and Roman governments. That Jesus was a human being is universally accepted.

However, Christ's divine nature is largely a matter of faith in the truth of the Bible and the teachings of the Church. In addition to scripture and ecclesiastical tradition, we have the testimony of millions of Christians who have affirmed (and still do) an experiential awareness of the divinity of Jesus. For many of us, the divine nature of Jesus is not rational knowledge as much as it is experiential knowledge. It is more an affirmation of the heart than of the mind.

In final analysis, the dual divine/human nature of Christ remains a mystery and, for most of us, this is as it should be. The doctrine of the Incarnation, like our several other paradoxical doctrines, is an attempt at expressing the inexpressible, at defining the indefinable. The richness of Christ's nature goes well beyond our ability to conceptualize, and this richness is best maintained in a doctrine which expresses the mystery in the form of a paradox.

## Atonement—Mending the Broken Relationship

The *Atonement* is the idea that, in some way, Christ's life and death made possible the renewal of an ideal relationship between man and God. God loves each of us, but through sin we turn away from God and toward ourselves. Because of this love for us, God came in the form of a man so that we could both fully understand God's love and fully understand the kind of personhood God wants for us. Then, God "so loved the world that He gave His only son, that whosoever believes in him might have eternal life."

That the life and death of Jesus Christ has made the Atonement (at-one-ment) of God and humans possible is a universal Christian belief. However, just what this means is defined in many different ways. Most of us affirm a variation of either the "satisfaction" theory, the "ransom" theory, or the "influence" theory of the Atonement.

Christians who believe the *satisfaction theory* explain that, because of our sin, a penalty is owed to God for our disobedience. In much the same way that a criminal appears before a judge, we stand before God and are guilty of turning away from God and toward our-

selves. Being guilty, therefore, we owe recompense for our disobedience before a good relationship between us and God can be restored. And, the amount of the recompense is much more than we are able to pay ourselves. Therefore God, because of compassion for us, allowed God's wrath against sin to be satisfied for all humankind by Christ's sacrificial suffering and death on the cross. Christ paid the penalty that was assigned to us. He "satisfied" God's judgment against us.

The *ransom theory* of the Atonement assumes that Satan, as well as the forces of sin, evil, and death, have us in bondage. We are held captive and separated from God by these forces. The possibility of freedom has been made real only through Christ's death. Some believe this death was a ransom paid to Satan but, generally, the theory focuses on the fact that, in Christ, God did battle with the forces of evil and won. Christ's victory over death broke the forces of evil in such a way that escape is possible for us.

Finally, a variety of Atonement theories center on Christ's life and death as an *example* for us. Christ's life of total commitment, love of others, love of God, complete obedience, and voluntary suffering for the benefit of others is an example of the potential life available to all persons. In Jesus' life and death, we see what God wants each of us to be and are influenced to live the same way. We assume that because Christ's exemplary life and death lead to his resurrection, ascension, and exaltation, something similar including a restored relationship with God, is possible for us if we turn obediently toward God and away from ourselves in the same way. In this concept, the death of Jesus was neither required nor desired by God or Satan. His violent death came as the inevitable end and the supreme example of a life lived entirely for the benefit of others. And we discover both a meaningful existence and a restored relationship with God when we accept this and commit ourselves to the same kind of living-for-others.

## Christ's Resurrection

Christ's atonement, regardless of which way it is defined, is inseparably linked with his resurrection. The atoning work of Christ might

have gone unnoticed if it had not been for the miraculous event which Christians call the resurrection. In a very real way, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the event which calls attention to everything else of importance in Christ's life. And, for many Christians, it is the ultimate evidence of God's power and love which proves everything else.

The resurrection of Christ is first affirmed as an historical event by its universal emphasis in scripture. Unlike many of our beliefs which are supported by only fragments of the New Testament writings, the resurrection of Jesus is affirmed in every New Testament book, and in many books it is mentioned on nearly every page. The scriptural evidence that something of a great magnitude happened is impressive. Secondly, Christ's followers were resurrected from a dead group of frightened fugitives to become a cadre of dynamic disciples who dispersed in all directions to courageously share their good news with the world. This resurrection of Christ's followers is proof for many that some miraculous event followed the execution of their leader. Finally, many persons point to the continuous resurrection of Jesus Christ in the lives of persons who make up his resurrected body, the church, as an affirmation of this miracle of his resurrection.

Exactly what kind of resurrection took place has been an object of controversy within the church from the earliest times, and even in scripture there is reference to both a bodily and spiritual event. In addition to those Christians who believe in the specific resurrection of Christ's physical body, there are others who believe that an undefinable event of great magnitude took place which gradually came to be described as resurrection in the preaching and writing of the early church.

So, the central affirmation of our faith which sets us aside as distinctly Christian is that God was, in Jesus Christ, reconciling the broken relationship between God and the world. Our witness to the world is, therefore, that life can be different today because, two thousand years ago, God acted decisively on our behalf and expressed love for us through the life and death of Jesus Christ.

## Reflection Questions

**When you think about Jesus, do you focus on his divine qualities or his human qualities or both? If Christ was both completely divine and completely human at the same time, how did he suffer on the cross? Why was he tempted to do evil? Was he afraid? How did he multiply the loaves and fishes? Was he unable to bring about the kingdom of God? Do you believe in Christ's bodily resurrection? What do you think when you hear, "Christ died for me"? Is it important to believe in Christ's miraculous birth to be able to affirm his divinity? Is it important to believe in his resurrection?**