

Christology in the Early Church

(notes from *The Christological Controversy*, “Introduction” pp 1-31)

Opening illustration, human outline figure, with h soul and h spirit inside, then a bright yellow Son of God which is to be joined with the human. How would you do that? Would it replace the soul? Would it replace the spirit, would it indwell like the indwelling of the Spirit in the Old Testament or in the CA? What would it look like?

Early Christology

The early church fathers were strictly monotheists. But they also believed Jesus was God, but they did nothing to explain this contradiction. But then they had to address the issue of just exactly how was Jesus God.

Heretical views

If Christ is not eternally God, then why doesn’t He need a savior? The problem was they thought that if Christ was eternal God, then you had 2 gods, so they made him something less than God.

If Christ is not fully God then the Church is worshipping a creature and we owe our salvation not to God, but to a creature, a secondary, lesser being.

In the earliest of years following the death of the last apostle two things were focused on in relation to their understanding about Jesus:

- a. God’s salvation, what had been promised and prophesied through the seers and prophets became realized in Jesus. The
- b. Jesus was the one through whom God would rule and was the mediator o salvation:

He was the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God.

Christology at its heart is the “inquiry and reflection that are concerned with Jesus *in his messianic character*. In other words, Christology asks what is presupposed and implied by the fact that Jesus is the elect “Son of God,” the one through whose life, death, and resurrection God has acted to realize his purpose for humanity; and this fact imposes, from the beginning a certain logic on Christology. To understand or evaluate Jesus christologically means, on the one hand, to ask about his relation to God [who He was *before* He came] and, on the other, to seek a way of expressing his representative character as a human being [who He was *when* He came] —his status as the one in whom humanity’s common destiny is both summed up and determined. Norris, 2

Key verses: Gal 4:4,5; 2 Cor 5:19; Matt 1:23; 1 Cor 15:45; Phil 2:6-7; John 1:1-14; Heb 1:2-3;

The Early Church Fathers (AD 100-150)

1 Clement 32:2 “² For from him *come* the priests and all the Levites who minister at the altar of God; from him *comes* the Lord Jesus according to the flesh; from him *come* kings and rulers and governors according to the line of Judah; and his other scepters will be held in no small honor, because God promised that “your seed will be as the stars of the heaven.”¹

^{36.1} This *is* the way, beloved, in which we found our salvation, Jesus Christ, the high priest ¹ of our offerings, the defender ² and helper of our weaknesses. ³ ² Through this one we look intently to the heights of the heavens; through this one we see as in a mirror his unblemished and lofty face; through this one the eyes of our heart have been opened; through this one our foolish and darkened understanding springs up ⁴ into the light; through this one the Master has willed the immortal knowledge that we should taste “Who, being the radiance of his majesty, is so much greater than angels, as he has inherited a more excellent name.” ⁵ ³ For so it is written, “The one who makes his angels spirits and his ministers a flame of fire.” ⁶ ⁴ But of his Son, thus spoke the Master: “You are my son, I today have begotten you. Ask from me and I will give to you the Gentiles for your inheritance, and for your possession the ends of the earth.” ⁷ ⁵ And again he says to him, “You sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.” ⁸ ⁶ Who, therefore, *are* the enemies? The evil ones and those who oppose his will.²

Shepherd of Hermas

⁴ But why ² did the Lord take his Son and the glorious angels as counselor concerning the inheritance of the servant? Listen. ⁵ The Holy Spirit, which pre-exists, which created all

¹ Rick Brannan, trans., *The Apostolic Fathers in English* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012).

¹ Heb 2.17; 3.1; 4.14, 15

² Lightfoot notes this is a “guardian, patron, who protects our interests and pleads our cause. To a Roman it would convey all the ideas of the Latin ‘patronus,’ of which it was the recognized rendering.” See also Ro 16.2.

³ Heb 4.15

⁴ Lightfoot comments, “Our mind, like a plant shut up in a dark closet, had withered in its growth. Removed thence by His loving care, it revives and shoots up towards the light of heaven.”

⁵ Heb 1.3–4

⁶ Heb 1.7; Ps 104.4

⁷ Heb 1.5; Ps 2.7–8

⁸ Heb 1.13; Ps 110.1

² Rick Brannan, trans., *The Apostolic Fathers in English* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012).

² ὅτι Lake] βλέπεις, φησίν, ὅτι αὐτὸς κύριός ἐστι τοῦ λαοῦ, ἔξουσίαν πᾶσαν λαβὼν παρὰ τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτοῦ. ὅτι Lightfoot Ehrman Holmes. Here Lake omits a conjecture from Gebhardt

creation, God caused to dwell in the flesh that he desired. Therefore this flesh in which the Holy Spirit dwelled served the Spirit well, walking in holiness and purity, in no way at all defiling the Spirit.³

Note, that Hermas's see the Holy Spirit as the same as the Son of God.

9.6.1 83.1 And behold, after a little while I saw a procession of many men coming, and in the midst of them was a particular man, tall with such size that *he* rose above¹ the tower.⁴

9.7.1 84.1 Therefore, having completed these things, the glorious man and ruler of the whole tower called the shepherd and handed all the stones over to him, those lying beside the tower which had been removed from the building, and he said to him,⁵

9.12.6-8 Do you see," he said, "the crowd that was building the tower?" "I see," I said, "sir." "Those," he said, "are all glorious angels, by these, then, the Lord [has been completely surrounded].³ But the door is the Son of God. This is the only entrance to the Lord. Therefore no one will enter into it otherwise, except through his Son.⁷ Do you see," he said, "the six men and the glorious and great man among them who walked around the tower and rejected the stones from the building?" "I see," I said, "sir."⁸ "The glorious man," he said, "is the Son of God, and those are six glorious angels supporting him on the right and on the left." He said, "None of these glorious angels will enter into *the presence of God* without him. Whoever does not receive his name will not enter into the kingdom of God."⁶

Hermas understands Christ is Spirit, Son, , and Angel, conflating these. Jesus comes from heaven as Spirit and Angel, but in a superlative category. He sees in Him something of the Wisdom and Word in the Old Testament.

Ignatius of Antioch (c. 35–c. 107)

(based on the Latin) that others include, positing homoioteleuton. The difference is adding "'You see,' he said, 'that he is Lord of the people, having received all power from his Father.'"⁹ Note that Ehrman includes this text in verse three of his Greek text, but includes the text in verse four of his translation.

³ Rick Brannan, trans., *The Apostolic Fathers in English* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012).

¹ 1Ki 8.8

⁴ Rick Brannan, trans., *The Apostolic Fathers in English* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012).

⁵ Rick Brannan, trans., *The Apostolic Fathers in English* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012).

³ Literally "has been walled around"

⁶ Rick Brannan, trans., *The Apostolic Fathers in English* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012).

Probably of Syrian origin, J. B. Lightfoot believed he was formerly a pagan and persecutor of Christians. He was the bishop of Antioch, Origen had him as the second. Ignatius was arrested and taken to Rome with a guard of 10 soldiers to be martyred. Along the way he wrote seven letters to local churches as he traveled under guard to Rome to be martyred.

1. Jesus was the Son of God

Mag 8:2 For the divine prophets lived according to Christ Jesus. Because of this they were also persecuted, being inspired⁴ by his grace, to fully convince the disobedient that there is one God who revealed himself through Jesus Christ his Son, who is his Word⁵ that came forth from silence, who in everything pleased the one who sent him.⁷

2. Jesus was also the son of Mary, who was physically human

Trallians 9:1-2 ^{9.1} Therefore be deaf whenever anyone speaks to you apart from Jesus Christ,¹ the one of the family of David, the one of Mary, he who truly was born, both ate and drank, truly was persecuted by Pontius Pilate, truly was crucified and died, being seen by those in heaven and on earth and under the earth,² who also truly was raised from the dead, his Father having raised him. In the same way he also, his Father, will likewise raise up us who believe in him in Christ Jesus, without whom we do not have true life.⁸

⁴ Literally, ἐπνέω is “to breathe out” but this instance in Ignatius is using it figuratively to show the source of the strength (their inspiration) of the divine prophets of old (cf. BDAG).

⁵ Jn 1.1

⁷ Rick Brannan, trans., *The Apostolic Fathers in English* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012).

¹ The description of Jesus Christ that follows, which centers on physical characteristics and earthly events, argues directly against the heretical Docetist teaching that Jesus was a spirit, and not a physical being.

⁸ Rick Brannan, trans., *The Apostolic Fathers in English* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012).

Ephesians 7:2 ² There is one ³ physician, both fleshly ⁴ and spiritual, born and unborn, ⁵ God in man, ⁶ true life in death, ⁷ both of Mary and of God, first subject to suffering and then free of suffering, Jesus Christ our Lord.⁹

What we see here is a belief in the deity of Christ, the humanity of Christ, his physical reality on the earth, but no analysis or explanation of how the deity and humanity are combined in one person.

The Apologists (AD 150-200)

Justin Martyr (c. 100–c. 165)

Under Justin there is the development of what is called the Logos theology. Justin taught in Rome in the mid second century AD. Uses the language of John :1-14 where Jesus is described as the “Logos” the Word of God.

1. Beliefs

The Logos is God’s Son, distinct from the Father, but begotten from Him. The Logos is the one who reveals the Father to Israel and was incarnate body, soul, and spirit 1 Apology 10:1

Justin’s contribution derives from the influence of Platonic and Stoic philosophy on his thinking. For him, the Logos is primarily reason. Reason according to Stoicism was the “indwelling, active, formative principle of the cosmos” i.e., that which ordered and sustains the world-system.

However, this Logos is not the first or ultimate Deity. In the chain of being, the ultimate deity begat or spun out this Logos who is also called the Divine Word, who reveals God’s being and purposes. He is like a fire lit from the fire of the ultimate deity.

For Justin, the Logos is derivative and thus is inferior to the One God.

³ 1Ti 2.5–6

⁴ Lightfoot comments: “The antithesis of σαρκικὸς and πνευματικὸς is intended to express the human and the Divine nature of Christ respectively.” See also Ign. Smyrn. 3.

⁵ On the phrase γεννητὸς καὶ ἀγέννητος, Lightfoot adds: “‘generate and ingenerate’, i.e. ‘generate as regards His human nature and ingenerate as regards His deity.’“

⁶ ἐν ἀνθρώπῳ θεός Lightfoot Lake Holmes] ἐν σαρκὶ γενόμενος θεός Ehrman. The difference in translation is “God in man” versus “God come in the flesh”. On this text-critical issue, Lightfoot notes: “This reading [ἐν ἀνθρώπῳ θεός] is demanded alike by the great preponderance of authorities and by the antithetical character of the sentence. The substitution ἐν σαρκὶ γενόμενος θεός may have been due to the fear of countenancing the Apollinarian doctrine that the Logos took the place of the human ψυχή in Christ.”

⁷ Lightfoot comments: “For his death is our life, his passion is our resurrection. … Here again there is reference to his two natures. He died as man: He lives and gives life as the Eternal Word.”

⁹ Rick Brannan, trans., *The Apostolic Fathers in English* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012).

For Justin: the Logos is the mediator between God and his creatures.

Norris: The indescribable, incomprehensible Creator touches the world only through his derivative self-expression. It is the Logos who forms the universe, who “appears” to Abraham and Moses, and who confers knowledge of God on all humanity by giving people a share in God’s rational nature.

2. Problems:

This Logos theology was opposed by the Monarchians, those who emphasized the oneness or unity of God. They correctly saw this as a threat to monotheism.

By adopting a chain of being derived from the Greeks, Justin attempted to solve the problem of Jesus and His humanity. The Logos was an intermediary between God and man, not fully God and not fully man. He was a halfway. These issues were not clear yet in the development of the thought. But Justin’s Logos theology continued to have an impact.

Another problem they wrestled with was how the eternal, infinite, Creator God could take on finite humanity. Further the Docetists argued that for God to take on genuine material body would somehow corrupt deity, since matter was thought of as evil. Docetism believed Jesus was only a shadow representation and could not have been genuinely born, or hungered or suffered or experienced a real physical death.

Behind this was a rejection of the Old Testament God. The Old Testament God was responsible for the present corruption of the world. Marcion and his followers developed this and were deeply anti-Semitic.

Justin’s theology focused on the question of what it meant the “God was with us”

Marcion and those influenced by Gnosticism rejected a genuine physical incarnation.

Melito of Sardis (d. c. 190), Bp. of Sardis

Little is known of Melito other than what we have in Eusebius Ecclesiastical History. In the 40s Melit’s *Homily on the Passover* was discovered.

Melito is important because he is a solid proponent of the apostle Paul.

Christ is fully god who became incarnate for the purpose of redemption of mankind.

The incarnation was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and the Mosaic Covenant. Melito emphasizes the value of God’s people before Christ.

The incarnation was a genuine, physical reality, a rebuttal to Docetism.

He describes Christ as ‘by nature God and Man’

Irenaeus of Lyon

Born in Asia minor around AD 140, Irenaeus eventually moved to Lyon in the southern part of Gaul. He rose in prominence in the Christian community there. We know of him from his most significant work *Against Heresies*, which is a direct attack on Marcion and gnostic views.

1. For him the problem in Marcion is their denial of the true deity of the Creator, they in effect held to two “gods.” The first, the ultimate Father has no responsibility for the present material physical world. The first emanation is less than God and is the God of the Old Testament and has no connection to the God of the New Testament. Marcionism was dualistic. A heavenly Christ and an earthly Christ. The heavenly Christ was doceticistic.
2. Irenaeus clearly understood that the ultimate God was also the Creator and was intimately involved with his creatures in the material realm.
3. Irenaeus understood Justin’s arguments but rejected his view of the intermediate Logos. Irenaeus recognized that it suggested a plurality of gods.

For Irenaeus, Christ is fully God and accomplishes the mediation not because he is an “in between” creature, but that as full Deity He takes on true humanity and it is the incarnation act which is the mediation.

For Irenaeus the incarnation is real “because it represents the unity of God with humanity and the unity of human history with God. God the Logos takes to himself in Christ the being of Adam.” (Norris, 12)

Tertullian of Carthage.

Tertullian was a lawyer, also a Montanist. He was a Latin speaking North African in Carthage. Two of his important works are *Against Praxeas* and *On the Flesh of Christ*. Like Irenaeus he is dealing with the problems generated by the Logos theology of Justin, and the Docetism and dualism of Marcion and the Gnostics.

1. Tertullian understood that salvation, redemption, involved the whole human person, body, soul, and spirit.
2. He understood that the physical bodily resurrection of Christ indicated that the whole of physical reality of man had to be saved. This means that Christ’s death redeems the entire physical creation from the curse.
3. In Against Praxeas, he argued against Monarchians who emphasized the absolute unity of God. In Monarcianism there is the problem that there cannot be a plurality.
4. Tertullian coined the word *trinitas*, in order to explain the plurality in the divine. That Son was a term that did not restrict itself to the humanity of Jesus and Father to the deity of Jesus. He distinguished between Logos and Father but both fully divine. Two separate *personae*. He said

Christ was one person. And in Christ a duality of two “substances” flesh and Spirit, i.e., human and divine ways of being. For him these two were mingled, though “not in such a way as to react on one another and be mutually changed.” (Norris, 14) The two substances were unaltered in the one person of Christ who was both human and divine.

Origen of Alexandria (c. 185—c. 254),

Origen was younger than Tertullian, but their times overlapped. Tertullian was further west in Carthage, but Origen was first in Alexandria Egypt then in Caesarea Maritima in Palestine. Origen was the successor of Pantaenus and Clement of Alexandria as the head of the catechetical school in Alexandria. Later he moved to Caesarea due to being forced out because of a difference with his bishop. In Caesarea his life was devoted to study and the teaching of the scriptures. Like many of his predecessors he was well taught in Greek philosophy which unfortunately influenced his method of interpretation as well as his exegesis and theology.

In *de Principiis (On First Principles)*, written early, he believed that God eternally begets his Wisdom or Logos, that there never was a time when the Logos did not exist. But at the same time he saw the Logos as not God Himself, not fully God, but a second God, or an image also subordinate to the Father. Again, like Justin earlier, the Logos is the mediator between God and the created order and the first of all in the creation. Under him were a universe of intelligent beings, or rational spirits who are finite, mutable, and possess freedom of choice.

1. The Logos is the mediator between God and His created order.
2. The Logos though eternal, is in some way not fully divine.
3. The rational spirits all fell and had to work their way back to God through knowledge.
4. Wisdom/Logos was the mediator to the fallen spirits which led to the incarnation.
5. The unification of the Logos with the one rational spirit which did not fall away from God becomes the soul of Jesus.
6. The next stage came when this soul was embodied through human birth.
7. In conclusion
 - Origen is similar to Justin in the way he expresses the need for a mediator,
 - His universe is hierarchical, heavily influence by chain of being ideas
 - For him the divine does not mix very directly with matter.
 - The Logos mediates God to the soul, so the soul mediates God’s Son to the body
 - This double mediation results in Jesus as a human being, soul inhabiting body, perfectly united as intelligence with the original, the divine Intelligence or Wisdom

Conclusion

1. In the tradition of Justin, there is a view that the Logos is something less than eternal God.
2. This developed from the influence of Greek philosophy.
3. By the time of Origen the worldview is shifting from Middle to Neo-Platonism. In essence the forms of Platonism all held to the material world as being somewhat inherently corrupt if not evil, and that ultimate reality was the ideal, the spirit, and thus their presupposition was that Christ could not have had a genuine material body for that would have diminished His righteousness.
4. On the other hand, there is a clear statement of Christ as undiminished deity and genuine sinless humanity, but how that was to explained was either ignored or various attempts were less than honest with the text.
5. This conflict led to the conflict between Arius and Athanasius and consumed much of the Fourth Century.

The Christological Controversies of the Fourth and Fifth Centuries

Arius vs Athanasius

1. All agreed that the Logos/Wisdom of God was divine. But what divine meant was not clear.

Did it denote a degree of deity, full deity, was it everything attributed to the Father God or only derivative?

This was what was implied in Justin but not stated, but then became explicit in Origen.

2. All of these men held to views that were derived from Greek philosophy, especially influenced by the idea of a continuity of being which was explicit in Gnosticism.
3. The problem was how to explain Who Jesus was before He came? After He Came, and to understand Why He came.

Arius

1. He was a presbyter from Alexandria who publicly taught from AD 318 that there was a time when Christ was not.
2. Arius firmly held to the unity of God, a Monarchian position. He overemphasized the Creator – creature distinction in a way that God became so transcendent that He could not by definition be involved within His creation.
3. He had two beliefs: 1. That the Logos could not be fully God, could not be undiminished Deity; 2. That the Logos is necessary to carry out the mediatorial role between the transcendent God and the created world.

4. Therefore, for Arius, the Logos was created, but was superior to all other creatures. He was created first before the ages, and was the agent for creation.

5. The conflict became a source of discord in the Empire of Constantine, so he convened a council to resolve the issue. Though he attended, the theological discussions were beyond him. Many of those who came had been persecuted years before. The Edict of Toleration, Edict of Milan had only been issued some 12 years before. Many of these Bishops bore the scars of their persecutions

6. There were essentially three groups: The Arians were but a small portion as were those supporting Athanasius. The majority, about 80% were unclear on the issue.

7. Athanasius argument was based on the necessity of the incarnation into a genuine human body in order that as true humanity the Logos, the Messiah could die as a substitute for mankind.

Athanasius stood with Irenaeus that only a real, physical union of God with humanity in Christ could solve the sin problem.

However, in this was the seed of the next problem: How could the Logos if he were truly God also have hungered, sorrowed, grieved, thirsted, grown tired. In other words, how are the Deity of the Second Person of the Trinity, the Logos, and the Humanity of the human Jesus united.

Apollinarius of Laodicea, Apollinarius the Younger, ca 310-ca 390)

Apollinarius was an orthodox Nicean and vigorously opposed the Arians. He was also a close friend of Athanasius. His proposal to explain the relation of the deity and humanity in Christ fell short and he was declared a heretic at the Council of Constantinople (381)

The question which was the focus of his view is: did Jesus have or not have a human center of consciousness.

Apollinarius' answer was no. He was responding to the teaching in Antioch that the incarnation was a unique case of the Logos' indwelling a human being. Apollinarius answer emphasized the unity of his person as "one incarnate nature of the divine Logos."

The problem is that his Messiah is not fully human, because the rational soul in Jesus was replaced by the Logos. So that the incarnation was simply the embodiment of the rational soul of the divine Logos into the human being.

"The divine Logos "became human" in the sense that he became embodied and thus shared the structural constitution of a human being. He became an infleshed intellect, though the intellect in question was not a created one..... He does not forget or ignore a human center of life and consciousness in Jesus. He denies it." Norris, 23

Criticism

The criticism came from the Antiochene school. They rejected the doctrine that Jesus had one composite nature, in their view they had two nature in Christ, the divine Logos and a complete human being, body, soul, and spirit.

In their two nature Christology they were protecting the deity of Christ from the limitations of humanity. The natures did not mix.

The weakness of their view as seen in the writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia is that the Logos merely indwells the human Jesus.

Nestorius (b. after 351; d. after 451)

Nestorius, the Patriarch of Constantinople takes his stab at it. In his view there were two separate Persons in the incarnate Christ and two natures. One Divine and One Human.

Instead of One Person two natures He has two persons and two natures. It is somewhat disputed if he actually taught this.

Nestorius was an monk in Antioch and a student of Theodore of Mopsuestia and became bishop of Constantinople in 428.

He was rash and dogmatic and soon conflicted with Cyril the bishop of Alexandria. This is always a problem as politics and power of one See against another is always in the background.

1. The conflict began when Nestorius claimed that Mary was not the theotokos, the mother of God, but the theodochos the recipient of God. The issue is was the divine Logos born of a human mother, or is the divine Logos subject to the human attributes of Jesus, that is the mixing of the two changing the other.

Nestorius said no, the human Jesus was born of Mary and suffered, died and was raised.

2. The Alexandrians said that Jesus is fully human who was intimately and completely indwelt by the Logos.

Cyril responded and denounced Nestorius. Cyril believed that Jesus human nature had a human body, human soul, and human spirit, he was not an Apollinarian.

He saw that the one Person suffered and died, that the divine Son was born suffered and died, and raise from the dead. He emphasized John 1:14 and Phil 2:5-11. He insisted this incarnation did not change the deity of the Son.

Cyril used the phrase “union of hypostasis” or “hypostatic union”

Nestorius thought this confused or mixed the natures.

For Cyril the one hypostasis, the union of deity with humanity made a full human existence without mixture or having the composite nature of Apollinarius.

Conclusion

Nestorius's view was condemned at the Council of Ephesus 431

Eutyches (c. 378–454)

He was the archimandrite (abbot) of a monastery in Constantinople.

He opposed Nestorianism and went to the opposite extreme of mixing the two natures of Christ. He argued that Christ had only one nature after the union. It was condemned at Ephesus in

It was Leo the Bishop of Rome who resolved the conflict in what has come to be called the Tome of Leo.

Eutyches was condemned at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 and exiled.

Chalcedonian Creed.