

Book Reviews

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1. Introduction

Studies about Christology are frequently shaped around the doctrinal statement of the Chalcedonian Council in 451. Together with Erickson and Macleod the present work follows a similar approach. In the first two chapters we will study along the historical development of Christology. An additional chapter will briefly describe the concepts of Wilson who wrote from a more practical standpoint.

Since the Christian faith is bound to the person and work of Jesus Christ, the early church was well advised to compose sound biblical teachings on Christology. The creedal doctrines were shaped naturally by refutation of the heresies and defined in rather negative terms. For understanding of orthodox Christology it is therefore vital to know the controversies that led to the creed of Chalcedon. Both Erickson and Macleod trace the historical process of debate.

The Chalcedonian creed for the most part remained the final word of the church on the doctrine of Christ. But time went on and Christological heresies were not erased. Especially Erickson goes on to expose the various outgrowths of present-day biblical scholarship and develops an incarnational Christology for our time.¹ Both Erickson and Macleod feel the need to lay some emphasis on the problem of historical criticism and base their arguments on the Bible itself.

¹ Millard J. Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh: A Contemporary Incarnational Christology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 13f.

The student's own Christological viewpoint will shine through by way of agreement or disagreement and emerge into a conclusion. Such judgment can only be based on the Scriptures, and for this reason we will include references. After all, Christology is part of theology, the study of the Word of God.

2. Orthodox Christology

Accordingly, Erickson and Macleod build their works on exegesis of the major Bible passages about Jesus. Erickson in his first chapter concludes that, according to the Scriptures, (1) Jesus was fully human, (2) fully divine, (3) conceived by a virgin, (4) completely sinless and (5) physically died but was then raised from the dead. Macleod's methodological approach is 'from above', "starting from faith ... that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God."² He argues that the New Testament presents Christ in the same way.³ Thus he begins with discussion about the divinity of Jesus in part one of his book, first with a chapter on the virgin birth, then about Jesus' pre-existence and his claim to be the Son of God, always including Bible references.

Macleod frequently restates and objects the various arguments of the critics. Overall, Jesus' divinity is most profoundly taught in the gospel of John, but its

² Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 16.

³ *Ibid.*, 22.

testimony not widely accepted. The challenge of historical criticism then calls Macleod to spend a whole chapter on the 'Jesus of history' in the New Testament, especially refuting Bultmann's theses. Erickson in his chapter on 'The Historical Problem', moreover, includes Lessing and Kierkegaard. Both aptly conclude that the biblical testimony about Jesus is historically reliable. On this basis Macleod proceeds with exposition of the early heresies that led to the various church councils.

The statement that 'Jesus is the Son of God' was successively challenged in different ways and from different sides. The following list recalls the major heresies that attacked the early church. Some were explicitly defended at church councils. Especially Erickson outlines the heresies in detail.⁴

Ebionism	Jesus is not God; the Trinity opposes Monotheism.
Adoptionism	Jesus became the Son of God by 'adoption' (at his baptism).
Monarchianism	Jesus the Son is subordinate to the (monotheistic) Father.
Arianism	Jesus was created; he is not self-existent, eternal God.
Docetism	Jesus is not human; he only 'seemed' to be human.
Apollinarianism	Jesus has one nature which is not 100% human.
Nestorianism	Jesus is two distinct persons, one divine and one human.
Eutyhianism	Jesus has only one (hybrid) nature since the incarnation.

⁴ Millard J. Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh*, 41-86.

Monophysitism Jesus' two natures became one ('physis') at the incarnation.

Monothelitism Jesus has only one will, not two wills (divine and human).

Macleod spends some time on the doctrine of Jesus' divinity, in particular on the meaning of *homoousious* ('of one substance'). Jesus is God in essence, yet he is the Son distinct from the Father and the Spirit. He is "begotten of the essence, but this does not mean that another essence was produced."⁵ Besides, he is 'begotten', eternal, but not created. And he is 'of one substance', not another God, but the second person of the Trinity without discrimination in range. Calvin's distinction was helpful to depict the Trinity: one essence (*hypostasis*), three persons (*ousia*). God is "one and the same essence, equally self-existent in each person."⁶

Macleod then addresses Jesus' humanity in part two of his book. He presents the orthodox doctrine of the incarnation as a historical response to Docetism and Apollinarianism. Even more he teaches about the whole of Jesus' humanity. Christ had a human body but also human psychology, e.g. will and emotions. Only in his 100% humanity he worked vicarious, substitutionary atonement.

The Chalcedonian doctrine in mind and at the same time refuting the more complex heresies like Eutychianism and Monophysitism, Macleod rightly points out

⁵ Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ*, 140.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 151.

that “it was a person, not a nature, who became flesh”⁷ (Jn. 1:14), and thus no nature could have converted into another. The Son did not change his identity, but he remained Son. The argument harks back to his preceding teachings on Christ’s pre-existence: “Without pre-existence the idea of incarnation would be impossible. The Son could not take flesh if he did not exist.”⁸ Eternally Jesus Christ is the one person, the ‘Son of God’, given as Son to incarnation and atonement. (Jn. 3:16)

Overall, the student of Christology learns much about Christ by understanding what Christ is *not*. Modern scholarship aims to go beyond such negative terms and tries to develop a positive statement. Sadly, most attempts come from the camp of liberalism and are more or less detached from the Chalcedonian creed.

3. Modern Christology

Macleod ends his book with some space on the newer teachings of the kenotic theory, the thesis that Christ took the fallen state of humanity and a final chapter about the uniqueness of Christ in comparison to fallen humanity. Some modernists simply deny the incarnation doctrine and regard Jesus as mere human. Macleod forcefully refutes Bultmann and Hick by strong ‘*reductio ad absurdum*’ arguments. Eventually, liberalism is further exposed in response to the Anglican Unitarians who deny the

⁷ Ibid., 185.

⁸ Ibid., 69.

divinity of Christ but somehow regard God and man as 'continuous'. The student agrees with Macleod: "If *Creator* and *creature* do not represent a radical qualitative difference, words have no meaning."⁹ To respond to liberalism is no happy task.

Erickson explicitly aims to construct a modern incarnational Christology. His approach is similar to the one of the early church. He reaches his goal by exposition of the modern heresies. In his evaluations he first points out the positive contributions of the theories before listing the heretical points. His avenue leads through Liberation Christology, Black Christology, Feminist Christology, Functional Christology, Process Christology, Universalist Christology, Postmodern Christology, Mythological Christology and Narrative Christology. Most attempts include some helpful considerations on the practical issues of theology on the one hand but show lack of careful exegesis on the other hand, often based on antisupernatural presuppositions. Modern theology is saturated with form criticism, redaction criticism and historical criticism. Erickson exposes the issues and defends the evangelical view. At one point he exclaims: "The incarnation stands at the very heart of what has always been meant by Christianity. To abandon or redefine it would so alter the meaning of Christianity as to make it scarcely worth calling by that name."¹⁰ The same emphasis was laid by the apostle John in his gospel and letters. (Jn 1:14; 1 Jn 4:2; 2 Jn 7)

⁹ Ibid., 243.

¹⁰ Millard J. Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh*, 358.

In part three of his book Erickson constructs his own modern view. Based on “The Reliability of the Historical Evidence for Jesus”¹¹, he first of all reinforces by way of careful exegesis that the biblical witness supports the orthodox standpoint. In agreement with Macleod, he then basically adds that “Jesus’ humanity was different from ours”¹², free from original sin, not fallen but sinless. He finally includes some practical aspects of modern theology, e.g. that Jesus welcomes all people.

4. Practical Christology

The openness of the kingdom is only one among many other practical aspects Wilson addresses in his book on Christology.¹³ His work is based on kingdom theology, the biblical teaching that even though God’s future kingdom is yet to come, it is at the same time already present in the person and work of Jesus Christ at his earthly ministry and the ministry of the Holy Spirit in this church age. Wilson’s goal is not that much to deepen the understanding of doctrine but “to help Christ’s disciples know the gospel more fully and live it more faithfully.”¹⁴ Enriched by illustrations, the book at times is more like a sermon than a lecture.

¹¹ Ibid., chapter 15 and 16, 383-429.

¹² Ibid., 563.

¹³ Jonathan R. Wilson, *God so Loved the World: A Christology for Disciples* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 36ff. and 147ff.

¹⁴ Ibid., 13.

Wilson starts with Jesus' teachings on the kingdom of God. He goes on to consider his life up to the cross and beyond and so reaches the question about the person of Jesus. His work is no systematic theology but an appraisal of the one coherent story of God's love shown to us in giving his Son. (Jn. 3:16) In fact, the death of Jesus Christ is at the very center of the Bible. Wilson describes the meaning of it by way of three images – Jesus as victor, sacrifice and example. Finally, he calls the reader to participate in the gospel story and so to 'practice' Christology.

5. Conclusion

In many ways the Western human mind is bound to dualistic thinking. Western man has difficulties to bring together humanity and divinity, or three persons yet one, just like God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. Faith founded on historical facts like the resurrection notwithstanding, we at times have to admit our limits and humble ourselves to simply accept the biblical teachings: Jesus is 100% God and 100% man for all eternity. Man cannot add much to this doctrine. After all, equally important as the belief in right doctrine is the Christian life of right conduct.

Bibliography

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