

Who is Jesus?

The question: who is Jesus? is not a simple historical or biographical inquiry; rather it functions as the foundational and structural centre of Christian theology as an academic discipline. This essay argues that the question is vital because theology's definition of Jesus's identity directly determines the coherence and validity of all other subdisciplines, including soteriology, ethics, and the nature of God.

Historically and textually, Christian theology operates within a dynamic tension between the "historical Jesus"-the human rabbi and teacher who challenged first-century religious hegemony-and the "Christ of faith", the resurrected Son of God and cosmic saviour of humanity.¹

If academic theology emphasizes one side of this comparison at the expense of the other, the entire discipline breaks down, losing either historical grounding or spiritual coherence and collapsing either into abstract mythology or mere political activism.²

This tension forms the basis for the argument Christology safeguards theological coherence. By examining these competing perspectives and their dogmatic synthesis in early church councils, this essay will demonstrate why Christology remains the essential foundation for the entire system of Christian thought.³

To understand why "who is Jesus?" is a vital disciplinary question, theology must first be grounded in the historical reality of first-century Second Temple Judaism. If theology treats Him merely as a heavenly myth, the sub-discipline of Christian Ethics loses coherence, leaving the church with no real-world moral pattern to follow. Without the historical Jesus, ethical models like compassion and humanity lose their grounding in lived experience. Scripture makes clear that Jesus possessed genuine, limited human biology and psychology. For instance, the Synoptic Gospels record Jesus experiencing physical hunger, fatigue, and even a limitation of divine knowledge regarding the eschaton.⁴

In academic theology, this limitation is explained through Kenotic Christology (derived from the Greek Kenosis-meaning emptying)-which teaches that the Son of God voluntarily restricted His divine attributes during incarnation.

Beyond His shared humanity, Jesus operated within His historic context as a brilliant rabbi or teacher.

However, unlike contemporary scribes who validated their teachings by quoting past authorities, Jesus taught His own unique authority, famously declaring, "you have heard that it was said ... but I say to you".⁵ This demonstrates that Jesus spoke with divine immediacy rather than derivative authority. This shift reveals Jesus acting as an eschatological prophet, announcing the Kingdom of God through His actions.

This announcement of the Kingdom naturally transformed Jesus into a transformative socio-political rebel. His ministry directly subverted both the Roman imperial status quo and the local religious hegemony of the Pharisees and Sadducees. The most compelling historical evidence for this rebellion is the cleansing of the Temple.⁶

¹ N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), p. 115.

² Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God crucified and other studies on the New Testament Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), p. 4.

³ *The Oxford Handbook of Christology*, ed. by Francesca Aran Murphy (Oxford: Oxford university press, 2015), p. 2.

⁴ The Holy Bible, Mark 13:32.

⁵ The Holy Bible, Matthew 5:21-22.

⁶ The Holy Bible, Mark 11:15-17.

Rather than a spontaneous outburst of anger, the act was a deliberate prophetic critique aimed at the Temple's economic exploitation and its collusion with the imperial Roman power.

E.P Sanders argues that Jesus's actions should be read within Jewish restoration eschatology rather than revolutionary zealotry, a distinction that reshapes how scholars interpret his mission. Attacking the Temple was an attack on the absolute political and economic engine of Judea, making Jesus's execution an inevitability.⁷

Building on Sanders' historical framework, N.T.Wright highlights that Jesus's proclamation of the Kingdom was not merely spiritual but carried a concrete historical claim.

Rebellion was not a call for violent military revolution against Rome, but a radical redefinition of Israel's hope, shifting power away from established political structures and toward the marginalized.⁸

However, evaluating Jesus solely through this historical lens exposes a severe disciplinary danger. If academic theology stops here, reducing Jesus to nothing more than an ethical human teacher and an anti-establishment rebel who died a tragic political death, then the entire sub-discipline of soteriology (the theology of salvation) collapses.

A dead human rebel can inspire political activism, but he cannot conquer sin, reconcile humanity to God, or offer eternal life. Together, these early interpretations bridge the gap between historical conventional faithfulness and the supernatural claims of the early church.

If reducing Christology to a mere historical rebel undermines soteriology, then neglecting the cosmic reality of the "Christ of Faith" creates an equal theological crisis. Without the supernatural realities of the incarnation, the divine sonship, and the resurrection, Christian theology loses its distinct identity, risking reduction to secular philosophy or ethics.

The essential pivot point that forced the early Church to re-evaluate the crucified teacher was the historical and theological claim of the resurrection.

Paul presents the resurrection not as a mere miracle but as divine vindication of Jesus's identity. As Paul states in Romans, Jesus was descended from David "according to the flesh" but was "declared to be the son of God in power ... by his resurrection from the dead."⁹

Within academic theology, this passage highlights a critical disciplinary transition: Jesus's fragile historical human lineage is explicitly juxtaposed with-and vindicated by-His cosmic authority.

The resurrection compelled the earliest Christian community to develop what scholars call a "High Christology from above." New Testament texts rapidly began attributing absolute, pre-existent divinity to Jesus. This is most clearly expressed in the Johannine Prologue, which states that "In the beginning was the word...and the word was God",¹⁰ before affirming that this eternal Logos became flesh.¹¹

Larry Hurtado's research shows that this devotion to Jesus as divine was not a gradual, centuries-long pagan corruption, but a sudden, explosive phenomenon driven by the disciples' intense post-crux experiences.¹²

⁷ E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985~0, p.61.

⁸ N.T.Wright, *Jesus and the victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), p.170.

⁹ The Holy Bible, Romans 1.3-4.

¹⁰ The Holy Bible, John 1.1.

¹¹ The Holy Bible, John 1.14.

¹² Larry W.Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), p.53.

Furthermore, Richard Bauckham further argues that early Jewish-Christian theology did not see Jesus as a second, lesser god-which would violate strict monotheism-but as included within the unique "divine identity" of the one God of Israel.¹³

For the academic discipline of theology, recognizing Jesus as the divine Son of God alters the entire landscape of Theology proper (the study of God's nature). If Jesus were merely a moral teacher, theology would reduce to anthropology-the study of human ethics and ideals. God remains an isolated, singular monotheistic deity. But, if Jesus is the divine Logos, then the cross reveals that the inner life of God is defined by self-giving, relational, triune love. Yet, just as a purely historical approach fails the discipline, a purely celestial Christology carries severe dangers. If theology focuses exclusively on the resurrected Saviour while ignoring the historical teacher who stood with the poor, the discipline becomes detached from human reality. It risks turning into an abstract, gnostic philosophy that ignores systematic injustice, poverty, and suffering.

Therefore, the academic survival of Christian theology requires a systematic mechanism that locks the human rebel and the divine saviour into a single, cohesive framework.

The enduring tension within academic theology, between Jesus of history, the human rebel and Christ the divine Saviour finds its systematic resolution in the development of conciliar Christology.

The early Church Councils did not invent new doctrines; rather, they constructed an authoritative, dogmatic framework to prevent the discipline from splintering into heretical extremes that would invalidate Christian soteriology. As explored in *The Oxford Handbook Of Christology*, these councils established a continuous theological progression that locked Jesus's historical humanity and eternal divinity into a single, cohesive definition.¹⁴

This synthesis of the historical and cosmic Christ forms the foundation of Christian theology, beginning with the council of Nicaea (325 AD), which defended the faith against Arianism. Arius argued that Jesus created, subordinate being, a view that threatened to reduce Christ to an exceptional human teacher. In response, Nicaea codified the term *homoousios* (of the same substance), affirming that Jesus is co-eternal and ontologically equal with God the Father. The Council of Ephesus (431 AD) then safeguarded the personal unity of Christ against Nestorianism, which sought to divide Jesus into two separate persons- one human and one divine. By affirming Mary as *Theotokos* (God-bearer), Ephesus ensured that the human child born in history was truly identical with the divine Son of God.

The climax of this theological synthesis came at the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD), which defined the doctrine of the Hypostatic Union. Chalcedon rejected Eutychianism-the view that Christ must be recognised in "two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, and without separation."¹⁵ This precise definition became the essential framework for Christian soteriology- the study of salvation.

The academic discipline of salvation relies entirely on the logic formulated by Gregory of Nazianzus: "What is not assumed is not redeemed."¹⁶ If Jesus lacked a fully human nature,

¹³ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God crucified and other studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI Eerdmans, 2008), p. 15.

¹⁴ *The Oxford Handbook of Christology*, ed. by Francesca Aran Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 3.

¹⁵ *The Oxford Handbook of Christology*, ed. By Murphy, p. 52.

¹⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus, Epistle 101, quoted in *The Oxford Handbook Of Christology*, ed. By Murphy, p. 114.

humanity would remain unredeemed; if He lacked a fully divine nature, His sacrifice would not possess the infinite capacity required to reconcile humanity to God.

Historically, the conciliar definitions demonstrate that “who is Jesus?” remains the foundational question of Christian theology. By affirming that two distinct natures exist perfectly within a single prosopon (person), conciliar theology secures the coherence of the entire theological system. It affirms that the historical rabbi who confronted injustice is the same cosmic Saviour who offers eternal redemption, uniting the ethical and salvific dimensions of the faith.

Fundamentally, the question “who is Jesus?” stands as the indispensable anchor for Christian theology as an academic discipline. As this essay has demonstrated, Christology cannot be reduced to the study of an ancient historical figure, nor can it drift into ungrounded celestial myth.

Instead, the discipline rests on a structured tension between the “historical Jesus”, the human teacher who challenged injustice, and the “Christ of Faith”, the resurrected Son and Saviour of humanity. Who embodies divine redemption.

The early Church Councils, culminating in the Chalcedonian formulation of the Hypostatic Union, successfully united these two identities together without dividing or confusing them. By doing so, conciliar theology preserved the internal logic of Christian soteriology, trinitarian theology, and ethics.

Without a rigorous, balanced answer to Jesus’s identity, the individual sub-disciplines of Christian thought lose their coherence and collapse, confirming that Christology remains the definitive gatekeeper of theology itself.

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