

Who Is Jesus?

Introduction

The question 'Who is Jesus?' is one of the most important questions in Christian theology. Christianity is built around the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but Christians do not understand him simply as an important religious teacher or historical figure. The New Testament presents Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God and the one through whom God brings salvation. For this reason, understanding who Jesus is affects many other areas of Christian belief, including the nature of God, salvation, humanity and the relationship between God and the world.

The Christian study of the person and identity of Jesus is usually called Christology. Throughout Christian history, theologians have debated how Jesus can be understood as genuinely human while also being divine. These debates were not simply arguments about words. They concerned the central Christian claim that God has acted personally in Jesus for the salvation of humanity. This essay will argue that the question 'Who is Jesus?' is fundamental to Christian theology because the identity of Christ shapes the Christian understanding of God, reveals what it means to be human and provides the foundation for Christian beliefs about salvation.

Jesus in the New Testament

Any Christian discussion about the identity of Jesus must begin with the New Testament. The different New Testament writers present Jesus in different ways, but they share the conviction that he has a unique relationship with God and a central place in God's work of salvation.

In the Gospel of Mark, Peter identifies Jesus as 'the Messiah' (Mark 8.29).¹ The title Messiah comes from Jewish expectations concerning a person chosen and anointed by God. However, Jesus does not simply accept the expectations that people may have attached to this title. Immediately after Peter's confession, Jesus explains that he will suffer, be rejected, killed and then rise again (Mark 8.31). His identity is therefore closely connected with his mission and particularly with his suffering.

The Gospel of John presents Jesus from a different perspective. It begins by describing him as the Word who was with God and who 'was God' (John 1.1). The Gospel then states that 'the Word became flesh and lived among us' (John 1.14).² These verses have had an enormous influence on Christian theology because they connect Jesus directly with God while also presenting him as someone who entered human existence.

Paul's letters also show that a developed understanding of Jesus appeared very early within Christianity. Philippians 2.6–11 describes Christ as existing 'in the form of God', yet taking 'the form of a slave' and becoming human. He humbles himself and becomes obedient to

the point of death on a cross. God then exalts him and gives him 'the name that is above every name'.³

These passages show why the identity of Jesus quickly became a theological question. The New Testament presents a person who experiences ordinary human life, suffering and death, while at the same time making remarkable claims about his relationship with God. Christian theology has therefore had to consider how these different aspects of Jesus belong together.

Jesus as Truly Human

An important part of Christian belief is that Jesus was genuinely human. The Gospels do not present him as someone who only appeared to be human. Jesus experiences hunger, tiredness, sadness, pain and death. He forms relationships with other people and responds emotionally to the situations around him.

The humanity of Jesus matters because Christianity teaches that God has entered human life rather than remaining distant from it. The doctrine of the incarnation expresses this belief. The term refers to the Christian claim that the Son of God became human in Jesus Christ. John's statement that 'the Word became flesh' became particularly important for the development of this doctrine.

The humanity of Jesus is also important when Christians think about suffering. The Letter to the Hebrews describes Jesus as someone who is able to 'sympathize with our weaknesses' because he has been tested as human beings are tested (Hebrews 4.15).⁴ Christianity therefore does not present Jesus as completely removed from human experience.

This has theological significance. If Jesus truly shares human life, then his suffering and death are not an illusion. He experiences the vulnerability that belongs to human existence. At the same time, Christians believe that his humanity shows something about what human life was intended to be. Jesus' life of obedience, love and service provides a picture of humanity lived in a right relationship with God.

Theologians have therefore treated the humanity of Jesus as more than an interesting fact about his life. It is essential to the Christian understanding of incarnation and salvation. As Alister McGrath explains, Christology has had to take seriously both the humanity and divinity of Christ rather than allowing one to remove the importance of the other.⁵

Jesus as Divine

Christian theology also makes the much stronger claim that Jesus is divine. This is one of the main differences between understanding Jesus simply as a prophet or moral teacher and understanding him in the traditional Christian sense.

Several New Testament passages contributed to this belief. John 1 describes the Word as God and then identifies the Word with the one who became flesh. Thomas later addresses the risen Jesus as 'My Lord and my God!' (John 20.28). In Colossians, Christ is described as

‘the image of the invisible God’ (Colossians 1.15). These passages helped early Christians to think about Jesus in ways that went beyond seeing him as an ordinary human messenger.

However, believing that Jesus is divine created difficult questions. Christians believed in one God, so how could they worship Jesus without believing in two gods? Questions like this became central to theological debates in the early Church.

The Council of Nicaea in AD 325 was particularly important in the development of Christian teaching about Christ. The Nicene tradition affirmed that the Son was not a created being but was truly divine.⁶ Later debates continued to ask how the divinity and humanity of Jesus should be understood together.

The Council of Chalcedon in AD 451 expressed the belief that Jesus Christ is one person who is truly divine and truly human.⁷ Although the language used in these debates can sound technical, the question behind it is fairly straightforward. Christians wanted to explain how the Jesus described in the New Testament could genuinely share human life while also sharing in the identity of God.

This remains important for theology today because Christianity does not claim merely that Jesus tells people about God. It makes the stronger claim that God is revealed through him.

Jesus Reveals God

The identity of Jesus matters because Christian theology understands him as a revelation of God. If Jesus is only a human teacher, then his teaching might provide useful information about God. If, however, Jesus is God incarnate, his life gives Christians a much deeper basis for understanding what God is like.

This idea can be seen in John’s Gospel when Jesus says, ‘Whoever has seen me has seen the Father’ (John 14.9). Jesus is not simply pointing away from himself towards God. His own life and character reveal something about God.

This affects how Christians understand divine power. Jesus certainly demonstrates authority, but he also serves people who are vulnerable and excluded. He washes his disciples’ feet, welcomes people who were often rejected and eventually accepts suffering and death.

For Christian theology, the cross is therefore not only an event that happens to Jesus. It also says something about God. The God revealed in Christ is willing to enter human suffering and act for the sake of others. Karl Barth placed Jesus Christ at the centre of Christian knowledge of God, arguing that God is known through God’s own self-revelation rather than through human speculation alone.⁸

This helps to explain why the question ‘Who is Jesus?’ cannot be separated from the question ‘What is God like?’ Christian theology understands the character and actions of Jesus as central to answering both questions.

Jesus and Salvation

The identity of Jesus is also closely connected with salvation. Christianity teaches that the death and resurrection of Jesus have saving significance, but this raises an important question. Why should the death of one person have such importance for everyone else?

Christian answers to this question depend partly upon who Jesus is believed to be. If Jesus were simply an ordinary person, it would be much more difficult to explain why his death should have universal importance. Traditional Christian theology connects the saving work of Christ with his identity as both divine and human.

Jesus shares human nature and therefore represents humanity, but Christians also believe that God is acting through him. His death is understood not simply as the tragic execution of an innocent man but as an event through which God deals with sin and restores the relationship between God and humanity.

Different Christian traditions have explained the atonement in different ways. Some emphasise sacrifice and forgiveness, others Christ's victory over sin and death, and others the transforming power of God's love shown on the cross. These explanations are not identical, but they all depend upon the significance given to Jesus.

The resurrection is equally important. Paul argues that if Christ has not been raised, Christian faith is 'futile' (1 Corinthians 15.17).⁹ This is a remarkably strong statement. For Paul, Christianity cannot simply continue as a collection of Jesus' moral teachings if the resurrection is removed. The resurrection confirms Jesus' significance and gives Christians hope that death is not the final end of human life.

The question 'Who is Jesus?' is therefore inseparable from the Christian question of what it means to be saved.

Jesus and Christian Understanding of Humanity

Jesus is important not only for what Christians believe about God but also for what they believe about human beings. If Jesus is truly human, his life provides a theological picture of humanity lived in faithful relationship with God.

The Gospels repeatedly show Jesus placing love at the centre of human relationships. He teaches that love of God and love of neighbour belong together (Mark 12.29–31). He also gives particular attention to people who are poor, sick, rejected or treated as outsiders.

This means Christology has practical consequences. Christian claims about Jesus should influence the way Christians understand dignity, service and relationships with others. Jesus' teaching about greatness is a clear example. Instead of connecting greatness with status and control, he tells his disciples that those who wish to become great must become servants (Mark 10.43–44).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer argued strongly that Christian faith in Christ cannot be separated from discipleship.¹⁰ Belief about Jesus is therefore not only a question of accepting theological statements. It involves considering what following Jesus means in practice.

This is another reason why Christology remains important as a theological discipline. The question is not only who Christians say Jesus was in the past, but what his identity means for Christian life in the present.

Why the Question Matters for Christian Theology

The importance of the question 'Who is Jesus?' becomes clearer when the different areas of theology are considered together. Christian theology asks questions about God, creation, sin, salvation, the Church and the future. Jesus is connected in some way with each of these areas.

Most importantly, Christian theology claims that God has made himself known through Jesus Christ. This means Christology cannot be treated as a small or isolated part of theology. What Christians believe about Jesus influences what they believe about God.

His identity also shapes Christian teaching about salvation. The incarnation connects God with humanity, the cross is understood as an act of reconciliation, and the resurrection provides the foundation for Christian hope. Without asking who Jesus is, it becomes difficult to explain why these events should have the theological importance Christianity gives them.

At the same time, the question remains relevant because Christians continue to interpret the meaning of Jesus in different historical and cultural settings. Theology is not simply about repeating earlier statements. It also involves considering what Christian beliefs mean and why they matter.

For that reason, 'Who is Jesus?' remains both an ancient and a modern theological question. It takes Christians back to the New Testament and the debates of the early Church, but it also asks what it means to confess Jesus as Christ in the present.

Conclusion

The question 'Who is Jesus?' stands at the centre of Christian theology because the Christian faith gives Jesus a unique place in understanding God and salvation. The New Testament presents him as Messiah, Son of God and the Word made flesh. Christian theology later developed the language of incarnation to express the belief that Jesus is truly human and truly divine.

Both parts of this belief are important. Jesus' humanity means that he genuinely shares human life, including suffering and death. His divinity means that Christians understand God himself to be revealed and active through Jesus. Together, these beliefs provide the foundation for Christian teaching about salvation.

The identity of Jesus also affects the Christian understanding of human life. His teaching and example place love, service and faithfulness at the centre of discipleship. Christology therefore has practical as well as doctrinal importance.

Ultimately, asking 'Who is Jesus?' leads into many of the other major questions of Christian theology. It raises questions about who God is, how God is revealed, what salvation means

and how human beings should live. For this reason, the identity of Jesus is not simply one theological subject among many. It provides one of the main foundations from which Christian theology understands God, humanity and salvation.

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