

Essay Title:

“Who is Jesus?”: Why is this question important for Christian theology as a discipline?

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Introduction

The question “Who is Jesus?” has stood at the centre of Christian theology since the earliest centuries of the Church. More than the identity of a historical figure, it is the foundation of Christian belief. Christian theology seeks to understand God, salvation and the relationship between God and humanity, all of which depend upon a right understanding of Jesus Christ. Throughout history, debates concerning Jesus' identity have shaped Christian doctrine and continue to influence theology today. Christian theology therefore continually returns to this question because the answers given determine how Christians understand God, interpret Scripture, proclaim salvation and define the Church. This essay argues that “Who is Jesus?” is the defining question of Christian theology because every major Christian doctrine, including the nature of God, salvation, revelation, the Church and Christian hope, depends upon the identity of Jesus Christ.

Why the Identity of Jesus is Foundational to Christian Theology

Christian theology begins with the question, “Who is Jesus?” because Christianity understands God to have revealed himself most fully through the person of Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1:1–3). While the Old Testament reveals God's character through his covenant with Israel, the New Testament presents Jesus as the fullest and final revelation of God. The Gospel of John identifies Jesus as the eternal Word who “became flesh” (John 1:14), while the apostle Paul describes him as “the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15). These claims mean that Christian theology is not simply concerned with Jesus as an important religious teacher, but with his unique identity as the one through whom God is known.¹

¹ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 1–18.

Consequently, the question "Who is Jesus?" provides the foundation for all subsequent theological reflection. If Jesus is truly the incarnate Son of God, then his life, death and resurrection reveal God's character, authority and purposes for humanity.² Conversely, if Jesus is understood merely as a prophet, moral example or gifted teacher, the central doctrines of Christianity require fundamental reinterpretation. Christian theology therefore cannot address questions concerning God, salvation or revelation without first determining who Jesus is.³

This foundational importance explains why the New Testament repeatedly asks questions concerning Jesus' identity, such as, "Who do you say that I am?" (Matthew 16:15). The earliest Christians recognised that their understanding of Jesus shaped every aspect of their faith, leading the Church to place Christology at the centre of theological reflection.⁴ As Richard Bauckham argues, the earliest Christian communities understood Jesus not simply as God's representative, but as sharing in the unique divine identity, making the question of who Jesus is essential to Christian theology itself.⁵

Identity Shapes Doctrine

The importance of the question "Who is Jesus?" extends beyond Christology because the answer shapes every major Christian doctrine. Christian theology is built upon beliefs that depend upon the identity of Jesus Christ. Consequently, doctrines concerning God, salvation, revelation, the Church and Christian hope all depend upon who Christians believe Jesus to be.⁶

The doctrine of God is fundamentally shaped by the identity of Jesus. If Jesus is truly the incarnate Son of God, then his life and ministry provide the

² Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, pp. 4-5.

³ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), pp. 322-324.

⁴ Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 1-26.

⁵ Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, pp. 182-232.

⁶ McGrath, *Christian Theology*, pp. 322-324.

clearest revelation of God's character. Christians understand Jesus' compassion, justice, mercy and holiness as the character of God made visible.⁷ As the Gospel of John declares, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). Consequently, Christian theology understands God through Christ rather than independently of him, making Christology central to the study of God.⁸

The identity of Jesus is equally fundamental to the doctrine of salvation. Christianity teaches that humanity is reconciled to God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, yet the significance of this saving work depends upon who Jesus is (2 Corinthians 5:18–19). If Jesus were merely a moral teacher or prophet, his death could serve only as an example of sacrificial love. However, Christian theology maintains that because Jesus is fully God and fully human, his death possesses unique saving significance, reconciling humanity to God and overcoming the power of sin and death (Hebrews 2:14–17). The doctrine of salvation therefore rests upon Christ's identity rather than his actions.⁹

The question also shapes how Christians understand God's revelation. Christians believe that God spoke through the prophets and the Scriptures, but the New Testament presents Jesus as God's fullest revelation to humanity (John 1:14–18). Through the incarnation, God revealed himself personally in Jesus Christ, allowing people to know him more fully. This understanding also shapes how Christians interpret Scripture, with Jesus serving as the centre through which the biblical narrative is understood.¹⁰

Furthermore, the identity of Jesus is indispensable to the doctrine of the Trinity. Christian belief that God exists eternally as Father, Son and Holy Spirit

⁷ Michael Reeves, *Rejoicing in Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), pp. 15–17.

⁸ Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, pp. 1–59.

⁹ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation*, trans. by John Behr (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), pp. 55–58, 77–82; Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction*, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), pp. 491–492, 507.

¹⁰ Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity: An Introduction to the Christian Faith*, 2nd edn (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), pp. 9–38.

developed from the Church's conviction concerning who Jesus is.¹¹ Reflection upon Jesus' relationship with the Father and the work of the Holy Spirit led the early Church to articulate the doctrine of the Trinity, demonstrating that the question of Jesus' identity shaped the Church's understanding of God himself.¹²

Finally, the identity of Jesus determines Christian understandings of the Church and of future hope. The Church exists because of Christ, proclaims Christ and seeks to follow Christ, while Christian hope is grounded in the belief that the risen Jesus will return to fulfil God's purposes for creation (1 Corinthians 15:20–28). The resurrection and promised return of Christ therefore provide the foundation for Christian worship, mission and eschatological expectation.¹³ Consequently, every major area of Christian theology ultimately returns to the question first posed by Jesus himself: “Who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:15). The answer given to that question continues to shape Christian doctrine, worship and discipleship, demonstrating why it remains the defining question of Christian theology as a discipline.¹⁴

Why the Church Debated the Question

The importance of the question "Who is Jesus?" is shown by its place at the centre of Christian theology throughout history. From the earliest centuries of the Church, disagreements concerning Jesus' identity were not regarded as minor theological differences but as questions that determined the boundaries of Christian belief.¹⁵ Consequently, the ecumenical councils devoted considerable attention to defining Christ's identity because the

¹¹ Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), pp. 15–32.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, 1st edn (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2008), pp. 123–156.

¹⁴ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, pp. 1–26.

¹⁵ Timothy Pawl, ‘Conciliar Christology’, *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, 1 November 2022, pp. 5–9.

Church recognised that its doctrines of the Trinity, the incarnation and salvation depended upon a right understanding of who Jesus is.¹⁶

One of the earliest and most significant controversies arose in the fourth century through the teaching of Arius, who argued that the Son was a created being rather than fully divine.¹⁷ The Church rejected this position at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, affirming that the Son is homoousios ("of the same substance") with the Father.¹⁸ This decision was not merely an attempt to settle a theological dispute; it safeguarded the Christian understanding of God, salvation and worship. If Jesus were not truly God, then Christian worship of Christ would be misplaced, and his work of salvation could not reveal God fully nor reconcile humanity to him.¹⁹

The debate continued during the fifth century, culminating in the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451), which affirmed that Jesus Christ is one person possessing both a fully divine and fully human nature. Once again, the issue extended beyond Christology alone. The Church recognised that only if Jesus were fully human could he truly represent humanity, and only if he were fully divine could he accomplish humanity's salvation. The Chalcedonian Definition therefore sought to preserve the coherence of Christian theology rather than simply resolve a philosophical disagreement.²⁰

These historical debates demonstrate that Christian theology has continually returned to the question of Jesus' identity because every major Christian doctrine depends upon the answer. As Alister McGrath argues, this is why Christology remains at the heart of Christian theology.²¹ The early ecumenical councils therefore show that the question "Who is Jesus?" has never been a

¹⁶ The Nicene Creed (AD 325).

¹⁷ Pawl, 'Conciliar Christology', pp. 5–9.

¹⁸ The Nicene Creed (AD 325).

¹⁹ Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, pp. 15–32.

²⁰ John Anthony McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), pp. 60–64.

²¹ McGrath, *Christian Theology*, pp. 322–324.

secondary issue in Christian theology. Instead, it has provided the foundation for Christian doctrine.²²

Why the Question Still Matters

The question “Who is Jesus?” remains central to Christian theology because it continues to distinguish Christianity from other religions. While many religions recognise Jesus as an important historical figure or moral teacher, Christianity uniquely believes that he is the incarnate Son of God. As a result, different answers to this question lead to different understandings of God, salvation and the purpose of human life.²³

Within Christianity itself, the identity of Jesus continues to shape theological reflection, biblical interpretation and Christian worship. Questions concerning the authority of Scripture, the meaning of the atonement, the nature of worship and the mission of the Church all depend upon who Christians believe Jesus to be (Matthew 28:18–20). As a result, Christology remains central to theology and continues to shape Christian doctrine.²⁴

Furthermore, the question possesses profound practical significance. Christian discipleship is founded not simply upon following the teachings of Jesus, but upon recognising and responding to his identity. As Michael Reeves argues, Christianity is ultimately centred upon the person of Christ rather than merely a system of beliefs or moral principles.²⁵ Its continued importance shows that Christian theology is not merely an academic discipline but an ongoing pursuit of understanding the person through whom God has made himself known.²⁶

²² Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, pp. 49–65.

²³ Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, pp. 1–5.

²⁴ Gerald O’Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 1–4.

²⁵ Reeves, *Rejoicing in Christ*, pp. 21–24.

²⁶ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), pp. 44–46.

Conclusion

The question “Who is Jesus?” remains the defining question of Christian theology because every major Christian doctrine depends upon the answer. As this essay has argued, the identity of Jesus provides the foundation upon which Christian understanding of God, salvation, revelation, the Church and Christian hope is built. The importance of this question is shown not only by its prominence in Scripture, but also by the Church's continued reflection on it throughout history and its ongoing significance today. Christian theology therefore continues to return to the person of Jesus Christ, recognising that knowing who he is is essential to understanding the Christian faith.

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