

Christ Throughout History

DAVE BAST

By any standard of measurement, Jesus Christ is the most important person in human history. Some 2.2 billion people in the world are called Christians because in some sense at least they worship him as God and follow him as Lord. Another billion-and-a-half people, the world's Muslim population, revere Jesus as one of the greatest prophets of God; and even many of those who don't believe in God nevertheless acknowledge the beauty of Jesus' life and teaching, and see him as an ideal to be admired. That is pretty amazing for a man who had no offspring, left only a few disciples, never wrote a book, and died a criminal's death at a young age. So, the question remains: Just who is this Jesus whom we call the Christ; and why is his the most important life ever lived? That is the question we have been exploring recently on *Groundwork*; and today, we want to wrap up our discussion. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and once again it is a pleasure to welcome Han-luen Kantzer Komline. She teaches theology and church history at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan. Han-luen, welcome back.

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Thank you, thank you. I am glad to be here.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, this is the fourth and final program in a short series we have done on Christology, or the theology of Christ; the branch of theology that answers that big question: Who was and is Jesus? Why do we call him Christ? Why do we call him Lord? Why do we believe he is divine? We have spent some time in Colossians 1 looking at Jesus as the head of creation, the head of the Church. We have spent some time looking at how the early Church concluded he was divine and is on a par with God and where the doctrine of the Trinity came from. So now, as we wrap up this series, we want to just kind of keep along those same lines of digging into the identity of Christ and what the early Church had to wrestle with to get this right.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and just the question I asked at the top of the program: Who is Jesus? There has been such a wide variety of answers to that. I remember a conversation I had in 9th grade with a Jewish classmate who assured me that there was no such person as Jesus who ever lived. He was just a fictional character. That is maybe pretty extreme, but there is a more common view, I think, including a view held by some scholars, that Jesus was simply a good teacher. He made a wonderful impression on his disciples, but then he died and they were sad, but then they discovered: Oh, wait; he lives on in our memory; and they began to say things about him; and pretty soon the Church had invented this idea that he was God as well as man. So, Han-luen, I wonder, how do we as Christians respond to that kind of viewpoint, which I think is pretty common?

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Yes, it is interesting because in some ways that viewpoint sounds more charitable toward Christianity than say the view of your friend from 9th grade; but really, it is not a view that is coherent, whatever else one might say about it, because it does affirm that Christ, as you said, was a good teacher, yet it denies that his claims about who he was were true; and so, both of those cannot be accurate at the same time.

DAVE BAST

Right; yes, the old C. S. Lewis quote...
Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Right.

DAVE BAST

“He didn’t leave that option open.” We have used that before on our program.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But you know, some of these views...Han-luen, you are aware of, I think, some of this literature as well...some of this has trickled down to the pop level today as well. In fact, there is a scholar, kind of a popular writer named Bart Ehrman. The Christian faith has all along said that the Son of God had existed as part of God from all eternity and became a human being as well. Bart Ehrman wrote a book recently with the title: *How Man Became God*; so he flipped it around, saying Jesus was only a man and they made up the divinity thing to keep their little gig going. Well, Han-luen, that has been a view that the Church has dealt with, really, all along.
Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

That is right, and you often encounter people who say that Nicaea was kind of a crucial juncture in that construction of the divine identity of Christ, saying that, really, Constantine thought that this would be a useful thing to invent for his political purposes...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.
Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

But what is interesting is, significantly before Nicaea, in 113, we have Pliny, who is a governor in what is today modern-day Turkey writing to the Emperor Trajan and saying: Hey, these Christian people are worshipping Christ as a god. So, that is even evidence external to the Christian scriptures confirming that this is definitely a powerful movement of worshipping Christ, honoring Christ as God, significantly before Nicaea.

DAVE BAST

Or even the New Testament itself. There are many, many instances, and we have touched on some of them in this series, where the New Testament writers affirm in as full a way as they can that Jesus is Lord—Jesus is God—all that that name Lord means. I remember a line from the great Old Testament scholar, Alec Motyer, who said somewhere that if you ask God *what* he was, he would have answered: Elohim—God; that is what I am; but if you asked him *who* he was, he would have answered: Yahweh—I am the Lord; and that is the name given to Jesus, even in the New Testament.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And what is interesting, too, Han-luen, as you were saying, we have external evidence like that letter from Pliny that the Christians are doing this; but of course, many Christians lost their lives on account of that; and so, I always remember...and it seems to me this has come up before on *Groundwork*, I cannot remember...but I always remember Charles Colson, who went to jail from the Watergate scandal, saying that one of the things that convinced him the most when he became a Christian that the Gospel was true was that everybody in the Watergate scandal swore that they would keep the conspiracy going, they would keep the lie going, and one by one when threatened with no more than six months in a medium security prison, they all cracked and told the truth. These apostles and the early Christians died rather than deny Jesus as Lord. This was not a made up conspiracy. They believed this to be the truth, right?

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Absolutely; and when you read the accounts of the martyrs, it is clear that they experienced Jesus Christ present with them while they were going through their martyrdom, through these incredibly painful, torturous experiences. So, that is another aspect of it, too, that they would even make that confession; and then when they did, what was their experience like?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Stephen was the first one, right?

DAVE BAST

Yes, I was just thinking of that, right. He saw Jesus in heaven.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He was being stoned to death—he was being bludgeoned to death—and yet, he said he could see Jesus and his face was like an angel as he died. That does not sound like something somebody would make up. So, we have...

DAVE BAST

Or something only a man could do, even a really good man, even a deified man; and maybe that is something else we should talk about. It is important, I think, from the Christian perspective and from the New Testament perspective to emphasize the fact that Jesus didn't become God at some point in his career. He was not sort of lifted up and adopted into the divine family, was he? That is an early mistake, too, that they said: huh-uh.

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Right, right; this was not some kind of promotion he earned by exemplary behavior. Yes, we are adopted into God's family, but Jesus Christ was the eternal Son.

DAVE BAST

That is what we are trying to get at when we say he is the only *begotten* Son of God; not that he had a certain point where he began, but that he is God's always Son, if we can put it that way.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and he wasn't always known as Jesus. He picked up the name Jesus when he picked up a human nature born of Mary, but the person...and we are going to get into this a little bit more in this program, too...the person of Jesus always existed from all eternity. He just was not known as Jesus all along until, you know, he was born of Mary; but that person always existed because he is God.

DAVE BAST

Well, we have been looking at and talking about a passage from Colossians Chapter 1, and we want to turn to that in just a moment.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

I am Han-luen Kantzer Komline. Just a moment ago, Dave, you referred to Colossians 1, and here are the key verses: Colossians 1:15-20 says:

¹⁵The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶For in him all things were created; things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities. All things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸And he is the head of the body, the Church. He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. ¹⁹For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him; ²⁰and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood shed on the cross.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you know, every time I hear that all I can say is wow. This is Jesus that Paul is talking about; and we pointed this out before. These words were written before any of the gospels were written; so, before we get the human story of the man Jesus of Nazareth and all of the things that he said and did, we have this kind of language that is asserted about him by the Apostle Paul, writing somewhere in the 50s, maybe early 60s of the First Century.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Han-luen, what do you make of that phrase, because this is...wow, Dave, you said...indeed, this is mindboggling. The claim in verse 19 that God had all of his fullness—his *pleroma* in the Greek—all of the fullness of God lived inside this person. How do you read that? What is the implication of that?

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Yes, I think that is particularly interesting to look at as a counterpoint to Arius's interpretation of that other verse that we looked at earlier where Christ is called the firstborn of all creation, because this verse says that he is the *pleroma* of God—the fullness of God helps us know how to interpret that other verse; and this is exactly what Arius wanted to avoid, this idea that this is a full-strength version of God, this is God from God, and that is what *homoousios* is all about: Whatever God is, that fullness resides in Jesus Christ.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Which is amazing, because indeed, Dave, you are right. This is before the Gospels, but...

DAVE BAST

And they are talking about a guy...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

This is a human being.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I mean, and Jesus himself said that in John, in a passage we looked at in a previous program in this series. When Philip says: Hey, when are you going to show us the Father? And Jesus said: Ta-da; you have seen him. it is me; and for the disciples that had to be mindboggling, because they had seen Jesus, you know, pulling a piece of parsley out between his teeth; they had seen him get sleepy and fall asleep in a boat; they had seen him stub his toe maybe. They saw this utterly human person, and yet, they were looking straight at God all along. That is amazing.

DAVE BAST

Well, yes; and here is this phrase...another phrase: He is the image of the invisible God. What do you make of that? Something about what Scott has just been saying, I guess, but...

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Right; it is the wow factor again because when you start thinking about that too hard, your brain hurts. I mean, God is by nature invisible, yet here is the *image* of who God is. So, this is like putting Christ's humanity, his creatureliness, and his full-strength divinity juxtaposing them right together.

DAVE BAST

And the Bible says that we are made in the image of God, but it never says we are the image of God exactly, does it? I mean, the way it does of Jesus here? There is something different about him.

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Yes, and this is one of those ways in which knowing who Jesus Christ really is can transform our whole way of reading the Old Testament, because suddenly we see: Oh, when we are made in the image of God, what does that mean? Well, if Jesus Christ is the image of God, suddenly that unlocks that mystery for us and helps us to see: Oh, this is what the image looks like. This is what we are created for.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the New Testament also teaches in other places that, of course, that image of God in us got distorted; it got smeared and bleared and polluted because of our sin. So nobody has perfectly been the image of God since Adam and Eve; but now Jesus has come out now as...and Hebrews 1 says this as well...that he bears the exact stamp of the divine nature. He is the Son who is his Father all over again. He is the image; and so, for us Christians, as we gain conformity to Christ, we gain conformity to God and the image of God slowly on gets restored in us back to what it should have been.

DAVE BAST

You know, there is something else here that I want to hit before we move on. In this passage, you know, the note on which it ends—this idea of through him—through Christ—God reconciled all things to himself—making peace through the blood of his cross. It is as though Paul was saying it wasn't enough for God just to send us a representative of himself; it wasn't enough for him just to have his image come and take flesh because our problem wasn't just that we were ignorant of God. It went deeper than that, and it took a much more radical act on God's part to undo the problem; and that is this idea of reconciliation?

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Right, right. Reconciling all things is in perfect keeping with the Son's identity as the one through whom all things were created, in whom all things have their meaning.

DAVE BAST

Right.

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

So this is coming full circle, and this is what Athanasius emphasized against Arius is that far from being a contradiction of who God is, what Jesus Christ did in his death and resurrection—so scandalous—dying on a cross—is actually in perfect keeping with the loving way that God has been relating to creation all along.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is so key because I think it was on the previous program, Han-luen, Dave asked you for a brief definition of Christology, the thing we have been talking about in this series, and you made it very clear Christology is the study of the person and the *work* of Jesus, and here is a passage that shows us how the work flows out of the person. If he isn't who we are claiming he is, he couldn't do that work. He couldn't do that work as a superior creature, as Arius claimed. He had to be God and human both fully to bring God and humanity back together again.

DAVE BAST

Without Christology there is no redemption, I guess we could say.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But let's talk in just a moment as we wrap up this series a little bit more about what I just said, that in the one person of Jesus we have perfect divinity and perfect humanity, both. How does that go? The Church spent a lot of time in the 4th and 5th Centuries wrestling with that, and we will talk about that in a moment.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee and Han-luen Kantzer Komline today, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are talking about this great subject of Christology: Who Jesus was; the person of Jesus Christ—God and man—fully God, fully human; and the work of Jesus Christ, which of course, started with creation, but then moves on to the reconciliation of all things; the work of redemption, of salvation. So, we have been looking especially at Colossians 1:15-20. We just read those again, but Han-luen, the struggle with coming to understand Jesus went on for some time. We have made reference to the Council of Nicaea and that great battle for the reality of the Trinity, that Jesus really is fully God, not just *like* God. After that was more or less resolved, and it didn't happen overnight, Christian thinkers and writers continued to struggle with how to explain Jesus, didn't they?

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Yes, for centuries and centuries, in fact. There was often the temptation to compromise, either on the side of his divinity or on the side of his humanity, because it is so hard...it is mysterious to imagine how full-strength God and a completely genuine human being could be united in a single person; and so, the Church really struggled with that; and there were a lot of proposals that kind of made that mystery a little more accessible, a little easier to explain away; but of course, that usually involved some kind of compromise of either the divinity or the humanity of Christ.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I have often said, and I think we have said it before in different series on *Groundwork*, that the road to heresy usually leads down the path of either/or. Most of the orthodoxy of the early Church became a both/and. Is God one or three? Yes, both one and three. Is Jesus human or divine? Both human and divine; but you are right, Han-luen. There were several schools of thought, right? So, there was something called *docetism*, which says he was only divine and just looked human. The humanity was like a costume he put on. So, that is the Superman thing, right? He looks like a mild-mannered reporter named Clark Kent, but he is really the man of steel. The other thing is a fake act. So, docetism says he is only divine, only faked being human; and then there is the other option that says: No, he was only human, but just had a really good sense of God; but he was totally human, not at all divine; and then there are some other mediating options, including one that says: Well, he is human and divine, but God kind of put those into a blender and whizzed them together; and he was a third something, the like of which nobody has ever been. How did the early Church...and a lot of this came to a head in the 5th Century, around 451 at a conference called Chalcedon...how did the early Church navigate these waters? It is pretty tough stuff.

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Yes, it kind of took varying issues at varying times and worked through them. So, one of the first proposals to come up in this vein on erring on one side of the other of this either/or was this view known as *apollinarianism*, which posited that Jesus Christ was basically God in a bod, like...or one might also describe it as a kind of spacesuit Christology, where God was inside this shell...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

This shell of Christ's human body. So, that was one proposal that was made that was rejected in 381. That proposal, you know, really compromised the full humanity of Christ.

DAVE BAST

Right.

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

I mean, it basically said he had a body but no human will, no human thought...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, no human soul.

DAVE BAST

No real emotions, no...and he was completely omniscient and completely omnipotent and all of that, which contradicts what we see of Jesus in the Gospels.

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Yes, it does.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, the orthodox version...for those of you who want to go check out the longest creed of the Church, the Athanasian Creed, which as my teacher, Neal Plantinga said, is not well named because: A) It wasn't written by Athanasius, and B) It is not a creed. Nobody can recite that thing! But that goes on at great length in the

second half of that creed to make it clear that he needs full humanity, full divinity. He is not two different persons, though, only one.

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So that is the orthodox bottom line: One person, two natures, fully God, fully human; one person; but why, Han-luen...if you think about that today, and of course, as we said earlier, there are various pop versions that tilt against this even today, but kind of on a practical level if you were talking to a believer who had some questions or something, what would you say is our comfort as believers that he is both fully human and fully divine in a single person? Kind of the practical bottom line for your average believer.

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Right; I think both the humanity of Christ and the divinity of Christ are absolutely crucial for our comfort, but in different ways. So, his full humanity shows us that he understands what it is like to go through human struggles, to be tempted, to be hungry, thirsty, in pain. So, he identifies with all of our weaknesses, yet he is also someone that we can rely upon to help us conquer them because he is not *just* human like us, he is also God, so we can be completely assured of his strength and his power, and that he will triumph and help us to triumph, too, in our own lives.

DAVE BAST

So when we say fully human, we mean he had a body, he had a mind, he had a spirit, he had a soul...however we want to describe those things, just like we do. Of course, as Hebrews says, except for sin. Fully divine, it means all that God is he was; but in some way did he limit himself, do you think, in becoming a human being? Kind of mask the Godness of it? There is mystery there, too, isn't there?

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Right, absolutely; there is mystery. At the same time, I think we can say he never gave up anything that would compromise his identity as fully divine and his unity with the Father and the Holy Spirit throughout his human life; but at the same time, you know, we might look at it as a kind of weakness, like: Oh, you know, he grew in wisdom...we hear in Luke...

DAVE BAST

Yes, how can God grow in wisdom?

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Right; so we might think: Ooh, that doesn't sound very Godlike, but the interesting thing is that the Christian faith affirms that was completely voluntary, chosen by God, so God is so powerful that God can enter the human experience, grow in wisdom, yet still be God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

If he limited himself by his own choice, that does not threaten his true divinity, because we know he is divine. This wasn't forced on him. For our listeners who geek on theology terms, this is *kenosis* Christology from Philippians 2, where he emptied himself of certain divine perks in order to be fully human, but he was, nevertheless, still fully divine, and that is the Church's confession, thanks be to God.

DAVE BAST

Well, thank you, Han-luen, for joining us on this program and the previous one. It has been a joy to have you.

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Well, thank you. It has been great to be here.

DAVE BAST

And thank you for joining our conversation on *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast and Scott Hoezee. We would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. So visit groundworkonline.com to tell us what topics or passages you would like to dig into next on *Groundwork*.

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