

**THE EQUIP INSTITUTE**  
**Theme: Christian Belief**  
**Topic: Person of Christ, Part 2**  
**Spring 2024**

**Introduction**

The Equip Institute exists to equip members of Taylors First Baptist Church to think rightly about God and His Word for the sake of living rightly before God in His world. This session focuses upon historical debates about the person of Christ, offers a systematic summary, and applies this doctrine to the Christian life.

**Review: The Biblical Picture of Jesus**

The Old Testament tells of a figure who is a human son, of Jewish ethnicity, from the tribe of Judah, a descendant of David, who will be born of a virgin in Bethlehem, who will conquer Satan, who will be a prophet, who will be a priest, who will be a king that rules an eternal kingdom comprised of all the nations of the earth, who will rise from the dead, who is the son of God, who existed in eternity before his physical birth. Four key passages in the New Testament focus upon the identity of Christ: John 1:1–18; Philippians 2:5–11; Colossians 1:15–20; Hebrews 1:1–4. These four texts, as well as numerous other passages in the four Gospels, confirm that Jesus of Nazareth is the figure who was promised in the Old Testament.

**What has the Church Said?**

The identity of Christ was the most hotly debated theological topic during Christianity’s first five hundred years. There was a general pattern to the debates. First, false teachers would come along and advocate unbiblical understandings of Christ. Frequently, key theologians would then respond by arguing for the biblical view. Finally, councils comprised of recognized church leaders (normally regional bishops) would respond by further clarifying what the Bible teaches and recording these clarifications in creedal statements. Over time, these creeds comprised a consensus affirmed by orthodox Christians.

There were eight key Christological heresies during the Patristic Era (ca. 100–600 AD).

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**Ebionism.** Jesus wasn't really God but was just a man. Ebionites believed that Jesus was Israel's Messiah, but argued he was simply a man uniquely used by God. This is the earliest Christological heresy, dating to the 1st century, though it had mostly died out by the early 2nd century.

**Docetism.** Jesus wasn't really a man, but was God disguised as a man. The name Docetism comes from the Greek word *doceo* ("to seem"). Docetism was the default view of the various Gnostic cults that competed with mainstream Christianity in the 100s and 200s. Irenaeus of Lyons challenged Docetism during the 2nd century. He argued Jesus is both God and man and that the OT promises about the Messiah are fulfilled in the events recorded in the NT.

**Adoptionism.** Jesus was born a normal man, but was divinely preserved from sin until His baptism, at which time the eternal Son of God was joined to Jesus and He was adopted as God's Son. Paul of Samosata taught adoptionism. Paul was countered by other church leaders and was deposed from his position in 269. Some modern theological liberals hold to a form of adoptionism.

**Modalism.** God has existed in three successive "modes" or manifestations throughout redemptive history. From creation until the incarnation, He was the Father. During Jesus' earthly life, He was the Son. At Pentecost, He became the Spirit. God is always Father, Son, or Holy Spirit, but He is never Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Sabellius taught modalism. Tertullian was the leading critic of modalism. He asked two key questions that undermined the whole scheme. First, to whom was Jesus praying if the Father had become the Son? Second, did God die when Jesus was crucified on the cross? Some contemporary Pentecostals hold to modalism.

**Arianism.** The Son of God isn't eternal but is the first created being. The Son of God was united with Jesus of Nazareth in the incarnation. This view is named for Arius, a pastor in Alexandria who sparked an Empire-wide controversy over the deity of Christ. Arianism (along with the earlier heresies listed above) was condemned at the Council of Nicea (325) and the Council of Constantinople (381). The Nicene Creed argues that the Son is "of one substance" with the Father. Unitarians, Jehovah's Witnesses, and some contemporary theological liberals hold to a basically Arian view of Jesus.

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Athanasius was the leading opponent of Arianism and at times the only vocal critic of the heresy. Later orthodox champions included the Cappadocian Fathers: Gregory of Nyssa, Basil of Caesarea, and Gregory of Nazianzus. All these thinkers argued the Son of God is co-eternal with the Father: the Son is divine in every sense that the Father is divine.

**Apollinarianism.** In the incarnation, the eternal Son wrapped Himself in human flesh, though He remained God "on the inside." In this view, Jesus' divine nature basically takes the place of a human soul. This view is named for Apollinaris. Apollinarianism was condemned at the Council of Constantinople (381). The leading critic of the heresy was Gregory of Nazianzus. Gregory argued that if Jesus is man on the outside and God on the inside, then He isn't the same type of human being we are. He famously argued, "What God has not assumed, he has not redeemed." Though a heresy, sincere Christians often hold this position because they haven't thought through the ramifications.

**Nestorianism.** Mary didn't carry Jesus' divine nature in her womb, but only His human nature. The divine nature was fused with the human nature at Jesus' birth. This view is named for Nestorius. Nestorianism was condemned at the Council of Ephesus (431). The leading critic of Nestorianism was Cyril of Alexandria, who argued this was just a new form of adoptionism. He also argued that there is a unity of the divine and human natures in Jesus, so that He is simultaneously fully God and fully man. Jesus shares with other humans everything it means to be human, just as He shares with the Father and Spirit everything it means to be divine.

**Eutylianism.** Jesus is a fusion of divinity and humanity, resulting in one new nature that is much more divine than He is human. This view is named for Eutyches. Eutylianism was condemned at the Council of Chalcedon (451), which produced the definitive statement about the person of Christ.

The only significant new Christological error to come along later was developed during the Reformation by Melchior Hoffman. Hoffman argued Mary didn't conceive Jesus, but rather she simply incubated Him after God placed the human embryo in her womb. Hoffman was trying to protect Jesus from original sin, but what he did was sever Jesus from any type of biological link with Mary.

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Jesus was a “fresh start” for humanity rather than the redeemer of existing humanity. Menno Simons embraced Hoffman’s views, and through Simons the “heavenly flesh of Christ” view became the default position among the Mennonites.

**What Should We Believe?**

The early church drafted two creedal statements in response to Christological errors. The first is the Nicene Creed, which was drafted at the Council of Nicaea (325) and revised at the Council of Constantinople (381). The Nicene Creed provides a summary of the biblical view of the deity of Christ and the Trinity.

*We believe in one God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible.*

*And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten son of God: the one begotten from the Father before all the ages, light of light, true God of true God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father, through whom all things came into being, who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and became flesh by the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, and became man and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried, and on the third day He rose again in accordance with the Scriptures and ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end.*

*And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and life-giver, the One who proceeds from the Father [and the Son], who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spoke through the prophets. In one holy, catholic, and apostolic church: we confess one baptism for the forgiveness of sins; we expect the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come. Amen.*

The second key statement is the Formula of Chalcedon (451), which clarifies the relationship between Christ’s divine and human natures. The Formula is intended to be a commentary explaining the identity of the Jesus of the Nicene Creed and the Scriptures.

*Therefore, following the holy fathers, we all with one accord teach men to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead*

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*and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance with the Father as regards His Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards His manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin; as regards His Godhead, begotten of the Father before the ages, but yet as regards His manhood begotten, for us men and for our salvation, of Mary the Virgin, the God-bearer; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from earliest times spoke of Him, and our Lord Jesus Christ Himself taught us, and the creed of the fathers has handed down to us.*

The Baptist Faith and Message (2000) is clearly informed by the creeds, even though it does not cite the creeds directly.

*Christ is the eternal Son of God. In His incarnation as Jesus Christ He was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. Jesus perfectly revealed and did the will of God, taking upon Himself human nature with its demands and necessities and identifying Himself completely with mankind yet without sin. He honored the divine law by His personal obedience, and in His substitutionary death on the cross He made provision for the redemption of men from sin. He was raised from the dead with a glorified body and appeared to His disciples as the person who was with them before His crucifixion. He ascended into heaven and is now exalted at the right hand of God where He is the One Mediator, fully God, fully man, in whose Person is effected the reconciliation between God and man. He will return in power and glory to judge the world and to consummate His redemptive mission. He now dwells in all believers as the living and ever present Lord.*

### **How Should We Then Live?**

We need to make sure we are right about the person of Jesus Christ because this affects everything else in the Christian life.

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We need to make sure that we're reading the Old Testament Christianly.

We should consider incorporating the historic creeds into our devotional lives and the life of our church.

**Recommended Resources**

Stephen J. Wellum, *God the Incarnate: The Doctrine of Christ* (Crossway, 2016).

Stephen J. Wellum, *The Person of Christ: An Introduction* (Crossway, 2021).

Daniel L. Akin, *Christology: The Study of Christ* (Rainer Publishing, 2015).

Gregg Allison, *Jesusology: Understand What You Believe About Jesus and Why* (B&H, 2005).

Darrell Bock and Benjamin Simpson, *Jesus according to Scripture: Restoring the Portrait from the Gospels*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Baker Academic, 2021).

Marvin Pate, *40 Questions About the Historical Jesus* (Kregel Academic, 2015).

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