

CHRISTOLOGY CONTEXTUALIZATION:  
THREE AREAS OF APPLICATION

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As Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen has noted, Jesus' question of who others say he is directed to the persons living in all times.<sup>1</sup> The concern of Christology has always been and will continue to be who Christ is. Yet, Christ's identity is always connected to his actions—his works. Following the older philosophical paradigms, we know who Christ is through what he has done. As it pertains to my life and to my context as one who teaches, there are three important areas of Christology that are pertinent to understanding Jesus: (1) expectations concerning Jesus' identity and his works, (2) as understanding of the diverse portrayals of Jesus, and (3) extra-canonical sources. The common thread that links these together is correct thinking about Jesus.

The expectations of Jesus—his identity and his works—are important if one is to think correctly about Jesus. Many people have various understandings of him. In this world today, many groups under the Christian umbrella claim to understand him. Many times their expectations are based on their understanding of him. For example, the Jehovah's Witnesses understand Jesus to be a created demigod who then created everything else; because in Jehovah's Witnesses theology, only God the Father is worthy to receive prayer, one must not pray to Jesus because Jesus does not answer prayers. Jesus' identity is demigod and his works are to mediate between God and humanity but not perform the works of God.

As a teacher of Holy Scripture, the outcome I seek is to recognize people's expectations of Jesus—where they line up with Scripture and where they do not—and then help them to come to see where their expectations are aligned with Scripture and where theirs might not be so. I have found that when people have proper expectations of Jesus, Jesus tends to be more manifested in our midst. Because Jesus is divine, one must expect the miraculous from him; because Jesus is human, one must expect that he is able to sympathize with us, and must also expect to be able to follow Jesus.

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1. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christology: A Global Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 9.

Recognition that Jesus is portrayed in diverse ways in Scripture is also significant. Yancey's book demonstrated this well. Because Jesus is neither stoic nor mundane in the gospels, one cannot suppose him to be so in his involvement in our lives. Indeed, the gospels themselves present Jesus in diverse fashions: in Matthew, Jesus is the prophesied Messiah and King of the Jews; in Mark, Jesus is the undercover Messiah; in Luke, Jesus is universal in his acceptance of people of all societal standing; in John, Jesus is the Son of God who was sent to bring life to those who would receive him. With Scripture as our guide, one can be open to Jesus at work in a variety of ways in one's life. This includes the ways in which Jesus answers prayer, heals, provides, and so forth.

My own teachings need to reflect the diversity of Jesus' person and works: His range of emotion and ways of interacting with others is important for understanding Jesus correctly. Many I know have a one-sided view of Christ; they suppose he can act only in one way. As an example, a few see Jesus as some sort of cosmic Santa Claus who distributes blessings based on whether one is naughty or nice. Those who are nice receive material and physical blessings, but those who are naughty get suffering. Yet, in the gospels, Christ is often consoling the suffering and his words for the "blessed," like asking the rich young ruler to sell all his possessions, are not so encouraging. When one recognizes that Christ is diverse and that both afflicted and wealthy believers are of Christ's body, one realizes that Christ cannot be limited to a certain kind of work or be portrayed as a certain kind of person.

Another considerable Christological area is the extra-canonical sources. A few in the class have expressed some discomfort with the non-canonical gospels. This uneasiness reflects the reality that there are correct and incorrect ways to understand Jesus. To their credit, the non-canonical gospels often retain elements of truth about Jesus. For example, in *Gospel of Mary*, we

find Peter and Andrew who oppose Mary's revelations. In *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, we find a miracle-working Jesus. Yet, despite these truths, the gospels distort Jesus and his teachings greatly beyond what know about him through the reliable canonical writings.

Very few people I personally know have bought into the apocryphal Jesus; the ones that have are not readers of the Bible to any degree. Because they have read very little of either the Bible or the apocryphal books, they hardly know the contradiction between the canonical Jesus and the apocryphal one. This highlights the importance of knowing the Jesus in the canonical writings. As was pointed out in the discussions, the non-canonical gospels help to stress the truth of Jesus found in the Holy Scripture. My emphasis, then, is to help followers of the Way ground their foundation in Holy Writ. I will not neglect or try to hide the other Jesus writings, but I will be diligent to provide a voice that rightly divides the word of truth to the Christian community.

In sum, Christology of the New Testament was a beneficial class to own walk and relationship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. By placing my focus on these areas in my own personal life and then in the life of my community, my desire to see the church grow into what it was designed to be—modeled after Christ and doing his work in the world.