

How Four Key Christological New Testament Passages Can Keep Us From Heresy

Professor M. Pohlmann, Extraordinary Professor of the Department of Theology Northwest University. Potchestroom and Master's degree supervisor, Baptist Theological College, Randburg, with Dr Axel Kazadi Nshindanyi Kayembe of Bible Life Ministries in Lydenburg, Mpumalanga.

Abstract

This article explores the Christocentric biblical outlook found in John 1:1,14, 18; Philippians 2:5-11; Hebrews 2:5-18, and Colossians 1:15-20. The aim of this article is to prepare Christian Evangelicals in Mpumalanga Province to be able to silence the heretics who raise questions related to Christ's deity; particularly in the areas of apologetics and evangelism. Some analysis and critique of some questionable views found in Black Theology, the Prosperity Gospel, African Initiated Churches like the AmaNazaretha Shembe Baptist Church, and the Zion Christian Church were predominantly echoed during the first four century AD ecumenical councils. This was indifferent forms like Ebionism, Docetism, Arianism, Apollinarianism and Modalism.

Preachers of these contemporary Christological errors tout a religion of self-deification coupled in some instances with syncretistic elements of mysticism and/or ancestral worship. Jesus Christ is often presented as 'less than' who He actually is. It is important to know that Jesus Christ is not a created being; He is eternal God in that He is the creator (Col 1:15-17), He is the Head of the Church (Col 1:18) and Christ is the beloved Son of God. Christ being fully man and fully God, Him, the Father, and the Holy Spirit are God and equal. Indeed, Jesus Christ is the sole reason for the existence of the Church.

1. Introduction

The Apostles taught about Christ which contained ideas that some of their immediate followers often found difficult to understand. While the writings of the early post-apostolic age (ca. 90-180) follow the language and teaching of the New Testament closely, they emphasized one God and Lord of all, and at the same time they believed and taught the deity of Jesus Christ. Now, as history went on from the first four centuries AD, Kolenda proposes that there was spiritual hunger coupled with later writers that drew from dominant ideas of Greek philosophy in which the supreme and perfect God is remote from the material world and unmoved by its cares, desires, or emotions (1974:30-33,39, 55). The early church Christians began to have struggles with theological issues related to the nature of Christ. It is in line with the above that Evans (1998:36) notes that: "The early Christological battles were fought with non-Christians, while later heresies were intra-Christian in origin" and contributed to the understanding

and the development of some important doctrines. These included the humanity and deity of Christ, the Trinity and their impact on the salvation. It is therefore helpful to examine these deviant interpretations of 'Christ's deity' exemplified in some Mpumalanga Churches using four main Christological scriptures from the New Testament.

The Christological controversies in the first four centuries offered occasions for deeper reflection (Emery 2011:59) and compelled the church to clarify, ground, defend, apply, and appropriately express her beliefs to her contemporary surroundings. As it happened with Satan misleading Jesus (Mt 4:7-10, Gn 3:4-5), it is worth mention that the ancient controversies are still at hand. Hence, the heresies of the first four centuries related to the 'deity of Christ' among the then Ebionites, Docetists, Arians, Apolinarianists, and Modalists are still felt among the contemporary preachers of the likes of Prosperity preachers, African Initiated Churches like the AmaNazaretha Shembe Baptist Church, Zion Christian Church and those that practice the Black Theology. There is an assault on 'Christ's deity' by blending into this doctrine syncretistic beliefs, practices and self-deification. It is particularly important to examine John 1:1,14-18; Philippians 2:5-11; Hebrews 2:5-18, and Colossians 1:15-20 in which early Christian writers articulated the distinctive Christian view of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

This project has been intentionally narrowed in its focus. The reason for this focus is ultimately for the benefit of Christian Evangelicals in the hope to call the Evangelical church of Mpumalanga to be prepared to assist the heretics with regards to Christ's deity and persuasively bear witness to the faith. Hence Evangelical Churches need to know the different methods some church leaders are using to oppress and alienate their followers from biblical Christological truth.

2. The Deity of Christ and Apologetics

Christ's claim to be equal with God underlies His teaching right from the start. In content and scope, His teaching embraced much that was new about the nature of God. For example, not only the Disciples but also the Jews soon recognized that He was affirming His equality with God (Jn 5:18). The Disciples could not long have missed the implication of the change in the very frame of His message from that of the Old Testament prophets, whose familiar introduction, 'Thus saith the Lord' was now replaced by 'But I say unto you' (Mt 5).

Jesus' words and His actions had to be an apologetic for His claim. People saw Him as a man; He had to prove to them that He was also deity, God in the flesh (Jn 1:14). The vestige of Judaism among the first four century Christians have been revived from time to time, either deliberately or in ignorance, often peddled from self-elevation and syncretistic point of view. Christ's nature can be said to

be at the centre of misinterpretation and necessitate apologetic functions.

Firstly, the misinterpretation of Christ's deity is seen in the form of the denial of the deity of Jesus as it was argued by Ebionism during the first century AD. It was said that He was predestined to be the Messiah, but in a very natural and human way, with no superhuman or natural gifts. Arguing in favour of his humanity, the virgin birth (Mt 1:16, 18-25; Lk 1:26-28; 3:23), the fact that He was born from a human mother, His identity Himself of His solidarity with human race as 'Son of Man' (Mt 8:20; 24:27). Many Ebionites held that Jesus, although he was a great prophet—indeed, the promised Messiah—was not fully or eternally divine.

Based on the above, how could Jesus be sinless without being separated from the sinful nature shared by the rest of the children of Adam? In order to answer this question, the apologist would do well by looking at the reason for Jesus' coming. He came to the earth to silence Satan's misrepresentations and accusation and to fulfil the role of fallen man's substitute and this determined the way He came, or else He would not have fulfilled its purpose and triumph over evil (1 Jn 3:8b). He became our substitute, the pioneer man, mankind's model and achieved this through (Rm 8:3; Jn 1:14). As mankind's model who was tempted just as we were and was like us in every way possible (Heb 2:16-18; 2 Cor 5:21; Gal 4:4, 5; Heb 2:18; 4:15, 16; Heb 5:2 (Waggoner 1890:26-27)).

Like the Ebionites who believed that Jesus Christ was just a human being who was empowered by God and that He is not God, the followers of Shembe, the founder of the AmaNazareth Shembe Baptist Church believe he too was called by God and is God. The apologist would do well by understanding the "God humbled Himself to make Himself man" as Scriptures present it. The failure to understand the doctrine of incarnation has led the Shembeites to pray in the 'name of Shembe' than to pray 'in the Name of Jesus'.

Another model is the Prosperity Gospel Churches such as the Enlightenment Christian Gathering (ECG) of Prophet Bushiri and the Black Theology Churches believe that their leaders are directly called by the supreme God and are carriers of special messages such as prosperity that extends beyond atonement (Hunt 1998:273-274) like wealth, healing or freedom, in the sense that it holds a weird interpretation of Scripture and align it with some contemporary non-Christian belief systems (Hummel 1991:28). The later result in self-deification; Christ becoming God like themselves.

To prove that 'Jesus is God', apologists can employ on one hand the communication of truth and discerning error requiring the use of reason. Since our faith is a reasonable faith, reason was part of the apologetics of Jesus. Jesus used the laws of logic to reveal truth, demolish arguments, and point out error. For example, in Matthew 12:22-28. Here the Pharisees accuse Jesus of casting

out demons by the power of the Devil. Through the use of reason; Jesus showed their accusation to be false. This positions one to see Jesus's divinity the way the New Testament presents it, that is, in close relation to the Father.

Surely many of the Christological titles confirm that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (Mk 1:1), the Lamb of God (Jn 1:29, 36), the image of God (Col 1:15), the power and wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:24), and the glory of God (Heb 1:3), to name a few (Hutardo 2010:53). The Nicene Creed communicates the same with its X from X formulae; "God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God" (Grudem 1994:1169). Verily, Jesus is described as God (Jn 1:1, 18; 20:28; Rm 9:5, Tt 2:13; Heb 1:8-9), yet as Hutardo shows, in all these passages God and Jesus are "uniquely linked". The apologist, when rightly equipped with the notion of the eternal equality of the Father and Son in nature and substance, should therefore be able to emphatically present the divinity of Jesus the way Scripture does.

Secondly, the misinterpretation of Christ's deity also in the form of Docetism in which Christ appeared to be human. Christ only appeared to have a material body and to suffer and die, since, at his essence, the Saviour is a divine, impassible spirit (Kinlaw 2005:74–76). As for Wilhite, the word Docetism is from the *Koinē* Greek: *δοκεῖν/δόκησις* (*dokeîn*) which means to seem and relates to all the human form of Jesus, was mere semblance without any true reality. So, in a fuller sense, Christ only appeared to have a material body and to suffer and die, since, at his essence, the Saviour is a divine, impassible spirit (Wilhite 2015:61-85).

The difficulty would be what minimum standard of humanity must a Christology fail to meet for it? Jesus went out of His way to prove His bodily resurrection in the Gospel of Luke to the Disciples who thought at first, they were seeing a ghost. He said: "Look at my hands and my feet. It is I Myself" (Lk 24:39). The apologist will do well should he realize that there still an interest of Docetism in the modern world remains of great interest.

Thirdly, the misinterpretation of Christ's deity also in the form of Arianism. This is a fourth century Christological error that denied the uncreated nature of Christ and the co-equality in the Trinity. Kelly notes that:

Arianism held that the Father alone was the eternal and true God, because He alone, in the full sense of the word, was ungenerated while the Son 'the Logos', who had become flesh in Christ, was generated, He could not be God, He had to be a creature who had been made before other creatures and made as the others were made through the will of God (1960:231-262).

The members of Arianism believe that Jesus is a finite created being with some

divine attributes, but He is not eternal and not divine in and of Himself. Arianism was opposed at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD. That is what explains the intermediary role of Jesus and the same justifies the idea of considering Jesus as a finite ancestor through whom African Initiated Churches do worship through their ancestors. Mbiti (1975:62-63), in Africa, many Christians are comfortable with the idea that Jesus Christ is a kind of mediator (intermediary) or a kind of divine active force. In traditional African religion, human beings who lived upright lives or national leaders are admitted into the rank of the divinities and spirits at death. These stand as intermediaries or intercessors for their relatives and posterity or community to the Supreme Being (Mbiti 1975:62-63).

Fourthly, in the form of Apollinarianism (denied the human mind of Christ). Apollinarianism is refuted by many passages of Scripture that teach that Jesus was truly a human being. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (Jn 1:14). In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form (Col 2:9). The Apostle John warned the early church of heresies such as Apollinarianism as mentioned in 2 John 1:7: “Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world”. These deceivers, said John, were spreading the doctrine of the antichrist (1 Jn 4:1-3, 7). This article suggests that Apollinarianism, like Docetism, which also denied the true humanity of Christ, must be rejected because it is an unbiblical view of Jesus’ nature.

Fifthly, in the form of Modalism. ‘Modalism’ opposed God’s tri-unity (Triune God) or distinction in the Trinity. As the 4th century Christological error, Modalists believed that there are no distinctions between the ‘persons of the Godhead’—the one God manifests Himself at different times and for different purposes in three different “modes” or “aspects.” Modalism was opposed by Pope Damasus. While Arianism tries to maintain the oneness of God by placing Son and Spirit outside the Divine being and reducing these to the level of creatures, Modalism tries to arrive at the same end by robbing the three persons of the Godhead of their independence. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not three persons but three ways, or modes, in which God has manifested God’s self or related to the world (Cels. 8.14). This all to say that while the Son and Spirit are subordinate to the Father in time, rank, and power, the three persons share one “substance”.

The Bible presents God as one God (Dt 6:4), but then speaks of three Persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Mt 28:19). How these two truths harmonize is inconceivable to the human mind. Because, God exists in three co-eternal, co-equal Persons. Jesus prayed to His Father (Lk 22:42), and now sits on the right hand of the Father in heaven (Heb 1:3). Now, the Father and the Son sent the Spirit into the world (Jn 14:26; 15:26). Based on the above, Modalism and the more specific Modalistic Monarchianism is theologically dangerous in

that it attacks the very nature of God.

The apologist will do well by advocating that any teaching that does not acknowledge God as three distinct Persons is unbiblical. Jesus Christ is not a lesser God or another way of God's manifestation.

3. Christ's Deity and Evangelism

John's prologue is a familiar text in Christological debates and perhaps the most influential Christological text in the New Testament (Hengel 2008:289). Although sometimes disputed, John's prologue offers us a "theological framework" against which 'Jesus' historical self-disclosure must be understood" (Ridderbos 1997:14). Or, as Köstenberger (2013:36) puts it, "The prologue provides us the glasses through which to see Jesus. As such, the prologue proves essential to understanding the true essence of Jesus' person and work" (cf. Hengel 2008:268). For example, in the prologue, the word of God was already there in the beginning, possessing the divine nature of God (cf. Jn 1:1). This word is none other than the Son who, at historical point, took on our humanity (cf. Jn 1:14). The result of the Son's incarnation is at least twofold in the prologue. For one, by becoming incarnate, "we have seen his glory, glory as the of the only Son from the Father" (Jn 1:14). For another, by his incarnation the Son, "has made the invisible God known" (Jn 1:18). 1:4-5, 9-11). So, by believing in the Son, they not only come to have life, but they become children of God (cf. Jn 1:12).

John's Gospel begins with a magnificent declaration of the Deity of the Son of God. It has profound implications for our theology of the Trinity, and meaningfully focuses our attention on the splendour of the incarnation. Here is the introductive clause: "*Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ Λόγος*, (In the beginning was the Word)". The beginning of the verse with the preposition "*ἐν*" meaning "in," is an interesting construction due to its implication. This is sensible because the Divine *Λόγος* existence cannot be confined within specified time settings.

The verb form "was" (*ἦν*) is in the imperfect tense, which typically "indicates an uncompleted and/or a repetitive action in the past" (Howes 2013:15). More importantly, as White (1998:198) indicates, "the verb doesn't point to a specific point of origin or beginning in the past".. Prior to the beginning then, the Word was already experiencing "continuous timeless existence" (Bernard 1962:2), that is to say, the Word was pre-existent (cf. Keener 2012:369). Moreover, if we consider 1:1a with 1:3, we cannot but note that the Word is not only eternal but uncreated.

If "creation is always God's work" (White 1998:58), then 1:3 reveals that this *λόγος* takes on a divine prerogative of creation. The substantive use of *πάντα* in 1:3 implies a universal category of created things, a category the Word stands outside of as its uncreated creator – "and the Word was God"(cf. Jn 1:3). That is,

both God and the Word would be the same person (cf. Wallace 1996:268).

After stating the common belief that “No one has ever seen God” (1:18a) (cf. Carson 1991:134), John makes the uncommon claim that “the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known” (Jn 1:18b-d). The divine nature of the Son is explained in a non-modalistic manner when the Son is said to be “at the Father’s side” (*ὧν εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς*) (cf. Voorwinde 2002:31). There is a present participle *ὦν* makes clear that this is “a continuing union” between Father and Son (cf. Morris 1989:114), paralleling the eternal relationship first revealed in 1:1a and 1:1b.

This is clarified in correlating three other Christological texts. First, Philippians 2:6-11 that tells us Jesus Christ pre-existed as God and was not adopted by God. Paul begins verse 6 via a discussion of the Son’s “existence,” though it is better contextually to view Paul’s words as “pre-existence.” The apostle uses the word *ὑπάρχων* to speak about the “eternality” of the Divine Son who was ‘existing’ in the ‘form of God’. The participle is again ‘timeless’ in that it does not point to any moment when Jesus ‘started’ to exist. Christ has always been in the form of God. It is worth noting that the use of “timeless” terms in reference to Christ’s “being” is not unique to the letter to the Philippians and is not limited to Pauline authorship. In the Fourth Gospel, the Apostle John also uses *ἦν*, the imperfect form of the verb *εἰμί* to denote Jesus’ timeless existence.

How can the Son, who eternally existed in the ‘form’ of God, who held equality with God be exalted higher than His position of the second person of the Trinity?” The answer to this question is found in Paul’s previous discussion on Christ’s Divine μορφῇ (*morphe*), humility, emptying, incarnation and humiliation. Jesus is raised back to His previous and rightful position of glory and exhalation that He held pre-incarnation (cf. Mt 28:18, Jn 17:5, Acts 2:34-35). Because of His divine nature, verse 10, which adds context to the issue at hand, proclaims; “so that at the name of Jesus,” seemingly indicating that it is the name of “Jesus” that is “given” in 2:9b. Moreover, Jesus is not given “a name” according to verse 9. Rather, He is given “τὸ ὄνομα” (“*to onoma*”) or “the name,” which seems to correspond with the Divine name of YHWH. Verse 10, a subordinate clause of verse 9, notes Jesus’ vindication with a citation from Isaiah 45:23 and includes three sub-points. The verse reads; “so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth” (NASB).

Secondly, Colossians 2:9 ascertains that Jesus Christ is not a created being; He is eternal God in that He is the creator (Col 1:15-17). Certain Gnostic teachers claimed that God made the world through a series of emanations from Himself and that Christ was one of these emanations. But Paul asserts that Christ is not an emanation from God, but God himself (1992:9), “He is the image of the invisible God” (v15). The word “image” implies representation and manifestation. This

denotes that Jesus is the very stamp of God. The apostle Paul shows in this verse that the supremacy of Jesus is first shown in relationship with God the Father, the begotten Son of God who reveals His Father, God (Jn 1:18). In His essence, God is invisible; but it was Jesus Christ who has revealed the Father to men. According to Millard Erickson, “Trinitarians insist that the ‘firstborn’ refers to preeminent one over all creation...” (2013:635).

It is important to deal with the root meaning of “firstborn” in order to get plain interpretation of the verse. If Jesus Christ was a created being, the Greek word would not be *πρωτότοκος* (prototokos-firstborn), but rather *protoktisis* (Biblehub.com). The apostle Paul mentions some characteristics of Jesus Christ in the passage proving the status or supremacy of Christ. These are: the image of the invisible God (v.15a), the firstborn of all creation (v.15b), creator of the universe (vv.16-17), the head of the Church (v.18a), the beginning, firstborn from the dead (v.18b), he is the fullness of God (v.19), and he is reconciler (v.20). These all characteristics prove that Christ is the supreme sovereign of the universe or in other word it assures that Jesus Christ is not a created being, but eternal God.

Colossians 1:16 defines the creative activity of Jesus Christ: All things were created “by Him”, “through Him”, and “for Him” (*αὐτῷ*). Jesus is presented here as Creator of all but not as created being. According to Paul’s clear witness, Christ is not only the one through whom all things came to be, but also the one by whom they continue to exist. “All things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible” may indicate the entire universe, both material and immaterial (Col 1:16). He defends against the heresy of the Colossians by affirming the Lordship of Christ over creation. Jesus is not as the teaching of Jehovah Witnesses, Arianism, Ebionites and others say He is, but He is as what the Scripture says.

Thirdly, of interest is Hebrews 2:5-18 that clarifies the human nature of Christ. Hebrews 2 emphatically declares his humanity. The writer draws attention to Christ’s solidarity with humanity by participating in human nature and dying. Gray (2003:338) states that the author of Hebrews emphasises “the sibling relationship between Jesus and the readers”. This is most explicit in Hebrews 2:10-18. A helpful outline this passage is: a) Superiority of the man Jesus over angels (Heb 2:5-9), b) Jesus Christ, saviour of man (Heb 2:10-13) and c) Being made like his brothers and sisters (Heb 2:14-18).

With reference to these verses 2:14-15, O’Brien argues that God’s children share the same humanity as the Son (flesh and blood), then there was a necessity for the Son of God “to assume the same human nature” so that he might become victorious over death and the devil (O’Brien 2010:113). The only way this could be made possible is through the “incarnation” (God made flesh) and death of the Son in behalf of the people. The purpose for Christ’s death is so that the children would be “glorified” (2:10), “sanctified” (2:11), “liberated” (2:15), and finally

“purified from sins” (2:17) (O’Brien 2010:113). Jesus understands the brethren because he was tempted as we are (2:18). In this verse 18, God’s children are given assurance of how Christ is a “merciful and compassionate” high priest. The passage states that Jesus himself ‘had suffered’ (πάσχω -perfect active indicative), ‘having been tempted’ (πειράζω -aorist passive participle, temporal participle). Not only does the Son care, but He can also help us when we are tempted.

By exploring the ‘deity of Christ’ and evangelism, we can observe some ways ‘His nature’ can be resourceful for the Christian evangelist, particularly in communicating his identity and the best way of worshipping God.

4. Role (Teaching Model) of Evangelical Christians in View of Contemporary Christological Errors

Jesus’ call to ‘disciple all nations’ (Mt 28:19) has been interpreted and applied differently over the history of Christianity. However, any approach to and practice of discipleship must be firmly rooted in principles derived from Scripture. Wilkins suggests that: “Though the discipleship literature revealed the following three essential dimensions that should be emphasized in every effective approach to helping believers become committed followers of Christ: the rational, relational, and missional dimensions” (Wilkins 1988:159), the challenge has remained in the areas of progressive revelations that several liberal Christian thinkers have taken advantage of.

In the case of Mpumalanga Province, there is a worldview that nothing happens without spiritual cause because whatever happens on earth is related to whatever happens in the spiritual invisible world (Nel 2019:1–10). Nel’s opinion is spiced with the prosperity gospel, the Old and Neo-Pentecostal/charismatic, New Prophetic movements. This means a belief in a Supreme Being (God), divinities, spirits, ancestors and the practice of magic and medicine. Kruger et al. (2009:36) name three categories in the spirit world of ATR: “Ancestral spirits, Nature spirits, and deities.”

5. Conclusion

The biblical understanding of the ‘deity of Christ’ will allow the Evangelical Christians to not only live out its Trinitarian faith (*cf.* Mt 28:19), but it will help them to consistently confess Jesus as the Christ and the Son of the living God (Mt 16:16). For the Evangelical Christians to do this, the appreciation of the ‘deity of Christ’ needs to deepen people’s understanding of who Christ is through the four Christological passages: John 1:1-14, Philippians 2:5-11, Hebrews 2:5-13 and Colossians 1:15-20., to bring into accuracy to that which is shared within its context

As for the Evangelicals, ‘Christ’s Nature’ and mainly ‘His Deity’ is the most

distinctively Christian doctrine of all. Because, it unlocks all other doctrinal doors of Christianity. If Christ is divine, then the incarnation of God, is the most important event in history and the existential impact of this fact is that he can transform whoever believe Him; the first-born over all creation. The concept first-born referring to Christ's supremacy (His pre-eminence), finally, Christ being divine, He pre-existed and He has the right to our entire lives, including our inner life and our thoughts and no man living or dead can afford to do that.

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Email: martin@btc.co.za