

Christ: Psalm 110, Christological Heresies

We move from studying the doctrines of man and sin to the doctrine of Christ. What a wonderful subject to study. We have eight lectures on this good topic and today we want to discuss Christological heresies. We can learn from the mistakes throughout the ages but also look at some Scripture passages—it would be nice to see one in each testament, but at least Psalm 110. As I read the psalm, see in your own mind where the break occurs. “The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’ The LORD will extend your mighty scepter from Zion; you will rule in the midst of your enemies. Your troops will be willing on your day of battle. Arrayed in holy majesty, from the womb of the dawn you will receive the dew of your youth. The LORD has sworn and will not change His mind: ‘You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.’ The Lord is at your right hand; He will crush kings on the day of His wrath. He will judge the nations, heaping up the dead and crushing the rulers of the whole earth. He will drink from a brook beside the way; therefore He will lift up His head.” This structural analysis is the work of Dr. Vangronigen: verses 1 to 3 and 4 to 7 form two different units. I say that because verses 1 and 4 begin with an oracle, a direct word of God to David’s Lord: “The LORD says to my Lord,” and then the words follow. In verse 4 it says, “The LORD has sworn and will not change His mind: ‘You are a priest forever.’” He is not saying that to David. He is saying that to David’s Lord, so a divine utterance begins verse 1 and verse 4 as well. There is a divine utterance, a little bit of an elaboration and an explanation, and then that same pattern again. The outline is not crucial for our purposes. But it is crucial to see the divine utterance beginning each of those two sections.

Let me work through the psalm briefly. Notice LORD is capitalized—from the time of the King James version at least it has been customary to distinguish Old Testament names of God by the way they are spelled in English. Either GOD or LORD in capital letters indicates the Tetragrammaton, that sacred name of God sometimes called Jehovah or Yahweh by different scholars, which is indicated in the beginning of verse 1. “The LORD, Yahweh, says to my Lord—*adonai*—sit at my right hand. The fact that David is the writer is important and it is demonstrated by the Lord Jesus ascribing this psalm to David in Matthew 22 and Luke 20. Old Testament scholars debate whether the psalm titles, the ascriptions following the psalm number, are authentic, whether they are inspired or not, but in this case Jesus corroborates the fact that David is the writer. That is important because as the King of Israel, David has one Lord, God in Heaven. Any other Israelite could be said to have two lords, God in and David on the throne, the king. He is the earthly lord; he is the theocratic king who reigns in the place of God. David has one lord and yet he says, “The LORD says to my Lord.” Some of the things said about the Lord go far beyond David or Solomon. “You will be a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek” was not said of any Jewish king—ever. They are amazing words. The Messiah is David’s Lord, the second Lord mentioned. “The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand.’” It is the place of honor and authority. “Sit at my right hand”—a place of equality with God—“until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.” Verse 1 already throws us into a context of conflict or warfare. David’s Lord is thus a warrior ruler, a warrior king. He is David’s Lord. He is a king and God will fight for Him. “The LORD will extend your mighty scepter from Zion; you will rule in the midst of your enemies.” David’s Lord, the Messiah, will be successful. He will defeat His foes because the LORD will fight for Him. “Your troops will be willing on your day of battle.” It is not going to be hard for this king to gather recruits to fight on His behalf. “Arrayed in holy majesty from the womb of the dawn” is a figure of speech that means from the beginning of the day. There are two possible translations for “your young men will come to you like the dew.” The NIV margin notes that would thus be a repeat of the first part of verse three, in essence. Your troops will be willing on the day of battle. They will volunteer. That is your young men, your youth—not your individual youthfulness—but the warriors will come to you like the dew. As the dew glistens in the grass in the morning so it will be countless recruits, there will

just be hosts of young, vigorous men willing to fight on behalf of David's Lord. In any case, the beginning of verse 3 says that. So if we follow the NIV marginal reading we have the same idea reinforced, which is not unusual in Hebrew. If we follow what is in the NIV text it is a slightly different idea, which is also taught in verse 7, so truth is not at stake. The two ideas represented by the two possible translations—one is taught in the beginning of 3, and one is taught in 7—are both true.

I will explain the other one. "Arrayed in holy majesty"—apparently he is dressed as a warrior king. "From the womb of the dawn you will receive the dew of your youth" speaks of God's invigorating David's Lord so that from the beginning of the day until the end he fights with great vigor; he is going to be successful. The dew of his youth is going to be restored. Both ideas are in this very psalm so it is not a matter of concern for theology—which one of those two is preferred.

Verse 4 is very important. Here we have a shift, a divine utterance again indicating the second part of the psalm. An amazing thing now is that not only is David's Lord a Lord and a warrior king who will conquer because God will fight for him, but David's Lord is also a priest and what a priest! Not a priest according to Levi, but a priest according to Melchizedek. That is just shocking. "The LORD has sworn and will not change His mind." Hebrews brings out the aspect that a solemn God has taken an oath. "You are a priest forever." A king of Israel is going to be a priest forever? That does not fit any earthly king. Even if you say that David is speaking of Solomon and the coronation ceremony in some way, then Solomon is a type of Christ. I personally do not think he is talking about Solomon at all. There are messianic psalms that work like that: they speak of David or the king at his own time, as a picture of the one who is to come. The things that are said here so far transcend any earthly monarch that I think it is a directly messianic psalm and one of the few that speak solely of the Messiah to come. "You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek," the mysterious figure who pops into the biblical record in Genesis 14 where Abraham pays him tithes. He comes out as a priest of the most high God. We do not know how he got to be that. He pops into the record, Abraham pays him a tenth of the spoils, he pops out of the record, and he only recurs here and in Hebrews 5-7. Here in Psalm 110 David says, "You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek." What in the world is going on? Rabbis would pluck their beards over this one. He is not in the order of Levi or Aaron; he is in a different order altogether. Hebrews 5-7 opens this up and shows the wonder of the human being Melchizedek, who is a type of Christ. It is the fact that his genealogy is not recorded, and not that he does not have one, that is emphasized. He is thus perfectly equipped to be a type, an acted prophecy, of the one who is to come, who in fact is eternal.

"The Lord is at your right hand." This is different than verse 1. In verse 1 the Messiah sits down at God's right hand at the place of honor and authority. This is "The Lord is at your right hand"—it is a battle scene and, when in hand-to-hand combat, you would like to have good fellow warriors on both sides of you. If you have a weakling on your right or your left, you could be in trouble. That person could go down and you could be hurt. This warrior has God at his right hand, fighting alongside of him. He will crush—it is a very strong word, to shatter or crush—kings on the day of his wrath. The Messiah is fighting a big battle here—it is kings we are talking about. "He will judge the nations, heaping up the dead," is a graphic reference to corpses being piled. We are speaking of a gigantic battle and victory for David's Lord and crushing (there is that word again) the rulers of the whole earth. If verse 3b is the way the NIV interprets it, then verse 7 reinforces that idea and this is just like Hebrews 2, ending each of the units with the same notion. "He will drink from a brook beside the way; therefore, he will lift up his head." He is restoring. The warrior is taking a break and drinking, and lifting up his head he is back at it again, conquering and defeating his enemies.

As an Old Testament psalm, I do not know how much David could even have understood of what God spoke through him, but the Messiah is David's Lord. He is a king and a priest. We see it in the New

Testament in Matthew 22:41-46 and in parallel passages. Let me show you briefly what Jesus does with Psalm 110. His enemies often came and tried to trap him with trick questions. This time he gives them an even tougher question in reply. Matthew 22:41, “While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, ‘What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is He?’ ‘The Son of David,’ they replied.” They mean He is in David’s line, a descendant of King David. That is not wrong and Jesus does not say it is wrong, but He does not say it is right either. What He does instead is throw confusion into their theological machinery. “He said to them, ‘How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit’—notice He ascribes 110:1 to David—“calls him ‘Lord?’ For he says, ‘The LORD said to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.’ If then David calls him ‘Lord,’ how can he be his son?’” This is a hard one. They would have to understand that the Messiah is both God and man in one person. Furthermore, they do not want to admit that He is the Messiah. Anyway, He has got them between stuck. “No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask Him any more questions.” In the Mark parallel, the people are happy to see their leaders confounded: “The large crowd listened to Him with delight.” Jesus does not deny that the Messiah is David’s son. He is his descendant, but He is also David’s Lord. He is God and man in one person. So the psalm contains a lot. It is in seed form, and only with Hebrews 5-7 and looking back we understand what this “priest according to Melchizedek” is. And it is only as Jesus gives us His exposition about at least one verse of Psalm 110 that we understand. But there is enough here in seed form to astound us. The Messiah is David’s Lord; He is a king and a priest at the same time and that indeed is a remarkable combination.

Christology is the doctrine of Christ; the adjectival form is Christological. Christological heresies are heresies dealing with the person of Christ. The study of the history of Christian doctrine is largely a study of controversies. It has to do with the effects of sin on the human mind. We can organize these Christological heresies according to the aspect of the person of Christ that they attack. After a while you forget where you borrowed everything from. I think I got this from Millard Erickson’s Good Christian Theology. Not that we want to invent any heresies today, but if we did, what could we do? You could attack Christ’s deity or you could attack His humanity. You could assault the fact that He is one person with two natures or you could assail the Incarnation itself. All of these things have been done. In that way, there is nothing new under the sun although there are new twists, but a lot of this is contemporary in different emphases. First of all, Ebionism, concerning which we do not know a great deal, was an early Jewish denial of Christ’s deity. It is part of the early Jewish apologetics. When Jews started to become part of the church, Judaism felt the need to have some answers. So some Jews denied Christ’s deity in explanation. The Ebionites seemed to be an offshoot from the New Testament Judaizers, such as appear in Galatians. They were strongly monotheistic, which makes a lot of sense. There is one God. They rejected the virgin birth. It is curious you can actually affirm the virgin birth and still be mixed up in your Christology. Islam, I believe the Qur’an, teaches the virgin birth of Christ but denies that God has a son and that Jesus is God incarnate. As an offshoot from the New Testament Judaizers, Ebionites emphasized the oneness of God, rejected the virgin birth, and taught that at His baptism the Christ descended upon the man Jesus in the form of a dove. That is a strange separation of those concepts. It sounds like Christian Science and it is erroneous. Near the end of Jesus’ life, when He said, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit,” the Christ withdrew from Him. At His baptism when the Spirit descends as a dove and on the cross when He says, “Father I commit my spirit into your hands,” these are occasions for cultists today to do funny things to. They should not do them and it is a situation of not patiently studying the Scriptures to see what those passages teach, but there are little openings through which they rush with false teaching. They reject His deity—they plainly, overtly reject that He is God. There is only one God, so it is impossible He could be God. That is a pagan notion. Obviously the descending of the Christ business, even the Talmud, calls Him a sorcerer. That is an acknowledgment of some miraculous deeds. He is not just a false prophet—though they call Him that too—but a sorcerer.

That indicates He was doing some activity here that is hard to explain, which the notion of the Christ descending on Him accounts for some of His extraordinary qualities—His miracles.

You may wonder how this is different from the Jewish thoughts and denials nowadays. Concerning Jewish thought today, there is a great neglect and avoidance of some of these things. In some congregations there is even an avoidance of Isaiah 53 in terms of Scripture readings. But where people do it, they would do it in more contemporary, unbelieving ways than this business.

Arianism is more subtle and is Christian in the sense of arising within a Christian community. Arius taught that Christ was the first and highest creature of God, thereby denying the fact that He is God. This emphasized the absolute uniqueness and transcendence of God. The Father worked and still works through the Word. The Word had a beginning, to use the very words of Arius, “there was a when [time] when He was not.” It is technically not a time; it is before time, but there was a once, there was a when, when He was not. He thus was the first creature. If this sounds very familiar, it is very close to so-called Jehovah’s Witness theology. I do not like to give them that designation. They are not really Jehovah’s witnesses, but they are witnesses against Jehovah. That is what they call themselves though, but their Christology is Arianism. The Jehovah’s Witnesses have three christs, none of which is the biblical Christ. Before the Incarnation (though you cannot call it that because they do not have an Incarnation), before His earthly life, He was the arch-angel Michael. There is a transference of His life principle to the man Jesus who is a mere man and after the resurrection (though you cannot call it a resurrection because it is a transference of a life print, and what that is I have no idea) there is the arch-angel Michael again. So you have angel, man, angel, and no continuity in the person of Christ. You cannot have atonement, you cannot have salvation; no wonder they are out knocking on doors feverishly trying to earn their salvation. It is so sad. I will say this as we move along. The cultists have many errors. Some of them ludicrous and some of them fatal, such as the denial of blood transfusions and denying of use of doctors for people who are sick, but the damning error of the cults involves the person of Christ and the denial of His deity because such a denial cuts one off from grace. You ask why that is so. It does not change who He is objectively. However, if you deny His deity you cannot be saved because you cannot believe in Him properly if you deny He is God. I am not saying you even have to have heard about the trinity to be saved and you do not even have to make an overt affirmation of His deity, but you at least need to implicitly confess His deity in this regard: you put your faith in the Son of God as someone able to save you from your sins. That is an implicit confession of His deity. I like an explicit confession even better, but you could implicitly believe He is able to save you and thereby believe He is God without even conceptualizing it or articulating it and be saved. Later on in discipleship you would learn, but if you deny He is God and you think He is the finest flower of humanity or an angel or something else, then you cannot trust Him to save you. And so the cults all add works to grace.

An unprecedented thing has happened in the past 10 years: the Worldwide Church of God, Herbert T. Armstrong’s cult, has discovered the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is unprecedented in the history of American cults. For years we saw it in the works and now it has happened. As a matter of fact, the leadership started with one little chink in their armor—at one point they were studying and it never stopped. They just kept studying more and more things. They now confess the Trinity, the deity of Christ, His blood atonement, and salvation through Him alone. It is exciting. They are not done with every other aspect, but they have got the Gospel and it is a wonderful thing. As the leadership came to these views, they dealt patiently with the ministers and gave them a couple of years to study things through. If they did not agree with the new doctrine of the church, they had to leave. I heard interviews concerning these leaders a couple of times on the radio. What was the response of the ministers who went along with the program? They said when they came to understand that Jesus was God and that His death and resurrection alone saved us, the results we got and the letters we got were so heartwarming.

One said, "I have been set free. For the first time in my life I understand the grace of God. A tremendous burden was lifted off my shoulders." These are the ministers and the congregations are largely filled. Of course, there are all kinds of splinter groups carrying on with Herbert T. Armstrong's pure gospel and all the nonsense of Israel and Judah being Great Britain and the United States, the dietary stuff and the bondage. But the main body, which has suffered tremendously—financially in certain terms of persecution; some families have been rent while others have been gloriously saved—has understood that the Gospel of Christ involves confessing the deity of Christ. It is an unprecedented thing and I just thank the Lord for it.

The son, according to Arianism, is different in essence from the Father. The council of Nicea in 325—the first major council of the Christian church after the Jerusalem council, found in Acts 15—condemned Arianism and said expressly, "The Son is of the same essence as the Father." He is homogeneous; He is of the same stuff; He is of the same essence. Those are two attacks on Christ's deity.

Docetism and Apollinarianism are two attacks on His humanity. Docetism holds that Jesus only appeared to be human. We can hardly understand this one today because of our philosophical climate, which is likely to deny His deity. Theirs was likely to deny His humanity. God was considered so transcendent that contact with the physical world was deemed impossible in Greek philosophy. Matter was considered bad in the platonic schools. According to Aristotelian philosophy, God is just impassable. He cannot be affected by the world. God could not become human since all matter is evil and God is holy. Docetic teachers say that Jesus passed through Mary. There was not nine months of Him being in her womb. That would be totally contaminating. There was a notion of transmission rather than her carrying Him. He appeared to be a human being, but He was not a human being. First John answers some Docetic strains. Who is the antichrist? It is the one who denies that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.

Apollinarianism is more subtle. It does not deny outright the humanity of Christ, but it denies the completeness of His humanity. John 1:14 was read like this: "The Word became flesh" means only flesh. He took a body to Himself. Some evangelical Christians approximate Apollinarianism: God took a body, but He took more than a body; God became a human being. This was not just a special species of indwelling. God became a human being. According to Apollinaris, Jesus was part human and the rest divine. The Word was the spark of life animating the body. Greek philosophy held to this notion of a governing principle of a human being, thought to be the mind. Jesus had a human body but not a human soul. He did not have a human will. The Word took the place of a human soul. This was condemned at the council of Constantinople in 381. As we summarize the teaching of the Scriptures concerning the humanity of Christ in our weeks to come, I will show you how there is a docetic tendency in evangelical Christianity. I will confront you with passages that affirm the full-blooded humanity of our Lord and you will be nervous about those passages. There will be tendencies within you, if you are like my students in the past, to be hesitant to confess His true humanity and I will show you how you should not be. We cannot fully understand—remember that I often talk about three mysteries of the Christian faith: divine sovereignty/human responsibility, the Trinity, and how Jesus could be man and God at the same time. We cannot understand, so there are mysteries. There are places beyond which we cannot go in our understanding, but we need to affirm what the Bible affirms and it affirms that God became a human being.

Let us move on to attacks on His uni-personality. The first and second attacks go together, the third and fourth go together, and so on. Fifth and sixth are both attacks on the fact that He is one person with two natures. Nestorius was installed as the patriarch of Constantinople in 428, a very important leader in the

Eastern Church. He *allegedly*—we can now say with confidence that one of the ironies of church history is that Nestorius was not a Nestorian—divided Christ’s natures into two persons. He did use ambiguous language, an inconsistent language, but he himself was not a Nestorian. He was attacked by Cyril of Alexandria who deserves some blame. It is not uncommon for people to misrepresent their opponents and to abuse their inconsistencies. That is exactly what happened. Nestorianism was condemned at the council of Ephesus in 431. You say, “This is dismal. We are studying one heresy after another and listing where they are all condemned.” Let us not repeat the mistakes of the past. If Nestorianism tears Christ in two, Eutychianism makes of Him a hybrid. If Nestorianism rends Him into two and holds the two natures too far apart, Eutychianism blends them so we end up with what philosophers call a *tertium quid*, a third something else that is neither God nor man. Eutyches denied the distinction between Christ’s natures. Eutyches was a layperson and a good guy who apparently should have kept himself out of theology. He was not a clear thinker. He just set himself up to anybody who wanted to attack a heretic. He said, “There were two natures before the Incarnation,” which is just nonsense. There was no human nature of our Lord separate from the Incarnation. There was no man that God came in and dwelt in. The humanity of our Lord never existed for a split second apart from union with the Word beginning in the virgin’s womb. It is not Christian doctrine to say there was a man, Jesus—right away red lights go off. He never existed apart from union. For all eternity He was the second person of the Godhead. He was God the Son; He was the Word, or the light, as John calls Him in chapter 1. So God always existed in three persons. The Son always existed, but the Son became a human being at the Incarnation. He did not indwell as a grown man. There was no previously existing human being or even a baby or humanity. There were other human persons, but Jesus’ humanity, from the moment of its conception, was united with the Word in the virgin’s womb. That is the Incarnation. This guy has got two natures before the Incarnation—what does that mean? One nature thereafter? The humanity of Jesus was absorbed into His deity and became virtually eliminated. Some Christians veer close to that. Now at God’s right hand Jesus is still God and man. Is there not a difference between His time on Earth and His life now? Yes, and Christian theology has seen fit to express that by a doctrine of the two states: His state of humiliation on Earth and now His state of exaltation, but the difference does not consist in the fact that He shed His humanity. That is actually an ancient heresy.

This error was condemned by the council of Chalcedon in 451, which is the ecumenical council that gave us the definitive statement on the person of Christ. So poor Eutyches got himself condemned at the most famous of the councils of the Christian church. It is a sad situation indeed. Lastly, there have been attacks on the Incarnation itself. These are modern errors. Adoptionism has some affinities to Ebionism, I admit, but it is very much a 19th and 20th century phenomenon. Adoptionism was an attack upon the Incarnation and thereby on Christ’s deity. It held that God adopted a human being by bestowing the Spirit upon him. Modern liberal Christologies are often adoptionistic. We distinguish between Christologies from above and Christologies from below. From above starts where the Bible starts with “The Word became flesh” in John 1—it starts with God in who becomes a human being. One could say, “The Bible does not always start there. The Gospel of Mark starts with Jesus as a servant, as a man on Earth.” True enough, but modern Christologies that start from below start with a mere man and then they have God come and indwell the man beyond measure. Still, if you start with a man you are not going to have a Christian Incarnation and He is never going to be God. Of course, this is a Christ, but it is not the Bible’s Christ, so they are making it up. It is not true—it is the Christ of the Jesus seminar. The Christ of the Bible comes from above and becomes a human being. Jesus of Nazareth, according to adoptionistic Christologies, was merely a man until His baptism when God adopted him as His son. There is not a true Incarnation.

More subtle than this is Kenoticism, a 19th century heresy. The Christology of Rudolph Bultmann, for example, is adoptionistic. This is the Spirit coming upon preacher Jesus, and even the church went so far

as to make Him a divine figure later on to worship Him. He never intended anything like that, but that was a creation of the church. The burden of some of Bultmann's writings is to explain how the preacher became the preached, how the herald became the subject of the message. That is heresy and if we had church councils doing their job, these things would be condemned too.

Kenoticism taught a reduction of Christ's deity in the Incarnation. It does not start from below with a man and have God come and indwell him. This is better in that way. It starts from above, but there is a reductionism. Philippians 2:7 is the proof text for this—although they did not start with the Bible and come to a new conclusion, rather they had a theology that grabbed hold of a verse. Jesus emptied Himself literally—it is the verb *kenoto*, from that you get kenotic and kenosis—the second person of the Trinity, according to Kenoticism, laid aside some divine attributes and took on human qualities. It does not say He laid aside the independent exercise of His attributes, which I would agree with. It says that He laid aside those attributes, which I cannot agree with. That is, Jesus is God in man, but not really simultaneously, but sort of successively. He was God and became a man and He retained some of His divinity. As soon as you have God giving up some of His divinity, you do not have God anymore. But wait; does that mean Jesus was in Galilee and Jerusalem and Judea at the same time? Was He omnipresent in the body? No. Then He gave up the attribute of omnipresence, right? Wrong. It is possible to have attributes and not to exercise attributes. He has all the qualities of deity but He only exercises them in obedience to the Father's will. The temptation by the Devil in the wilderness seems to be an appeal to try to get Jesus to use His divine qualities out of the Father's will and He steadfastly refused to do that. There has been some progress made by evangelical thinkers especially in this century. We will try to preserve His possessing those attributes and at the same time talk about Him only using them according to the Father's will.