

CHRISTIAN SERVICE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

Department of Theology



**African Christian Christology and Chalcedonian Confession:
A Reflection of John Pobee's Christology**

PROJECT WORK

(LONG ESSAY)

BY

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July, 2015

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A long essay submitted to Christian Service University College in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Arts in Christian Theology with Management

DECLARATION

I, Seth Amoako Hammond do hereby declare that this thesis/dissertation/ project report is the result of my own original research, except for sections for which references have been duly made, and to the best of my knowledge, no part of it has been presented to this University College or any other institution for the award of a degree.

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the entire Christian Community and especially the Sunday School Ministry of Living Waters Chapel (Assemblies Of God) and my lovely wife Vivian Amoako Hammond for her unfailing support towards the conclusion of this study.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

To God be the Glory for the great things He has done. I owe much gratitude to the Almighty God for his goodness showered unto me during this programme. I also thank my dear wife Vivian Amoako Hammond (Principal Pharmacist – KATH) for her support and understanding throughout the period of study and to all my children – Nana Agyeiwaa, Oheneba Amoako, Awura Ama, Maame Akua Adowaa, Atta Panyin, Atta Kakra and Ohemma Nyamekye for the time they missed me during the course of my study.

I am particularly grateful to Dr. Robert Owusu Agyarko my supervisor whose direction and constructive suggestions have helped me produce this project work. I will not forget all my lecturers and course mates who have imparted much knowledge into my life.

I say a very big thank you to Mrs. Rejoice Wireko-Gyebi for her invaluable assistance and all my colleagues who helped in diverse ways towards this project.

Lastly but not the least, I would like to show appreciation to Nancy Naamogtan (a friend and an office colleague) whose advise, encouragement and motivation propelled me to complete the course at the time when I wanted to quit due to office pressure. I thank the entire members of the Sunday School Ministry of Living Waters Chapel for their continuous support and especially Louis Adu-Amoah for the final proofreading.

Finally, I thank all other contributors for their commendable editorial co-operation as well as authors from whom references were made.

ABSTRACT

The primary doctrinal reference point for African Christianity has been the Chalcedon Confession which states that Christ is “true God” and “true man” united in one person, the person of the Son of God in the Trinity. This definition is officially accepted by the Roman Catholics, the Protestant Reformers, the Evangelicals and some others as the reference point of Christology. However, Creeds are regarded more often than not as outmoded restrictions on the free play of thought. Pobee is one of the Africa theologians, who have registered protest against the Chalcedonian Creed. However, the relationship between Pobee’s view and the Chalcedon’s Confession has not been adequately addressed. Thus the study assesses the relationship between Pobee’s Christology and the Nicene/Chalcedon confessional of the person of Christ. The study is basically a textual and conceptual analysis. The sources of data are secondary data from journal publications, books as well as other internet sources.

The study revealed Pobee’s Christology differs remarkably from the Nicene- Chalcedonian Christology. Pobee argues that Jesus’ divinity is sensed or deduced from his operations, that is his functions, in the world. And so, the emphasis is on God’s relation to man rather than on any metaphysical status as confessed by the Nicene – Chalcedon Creed. Thus for Pobee’s Christology, the divinity of Jesus is functional – Jesus was full embodiment of God but not God in the sense of God the Father. Chalcedon definition of the person of Christ is ontological divinity – God in the sense of co-equal and co-eternal with God the Father. The implications of both positions have been drawn and relate to African Christianity.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The primary doctrinal reference point for African Christianity has been the Chalcedon Confession which states that Christ is “true God” and “true man” united in one person, the person of the Son of God in the Trinity. It therefore answers the question, who is Jesus Christ, with precision. Of special significance are the four terms used to express the union of the two natures of Christ and their relationship: *inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably*.

This definition is officially accepted by the Roman Catholics, the Evangelicals, the Reformers and some others as the reference point of Christology. However, in this age, it seems that creeds are regarded more often than not as outmoded restrictions on the free play of thought and imagination. For some theologians, the Chalcedon definition about the person of Christ is outmoded in character, therefore need not be followed as reference point for 21st century Christianity. Such reactions come from both Catholic and Protestant perspectives. Some major publications from Roman Catholic theologians who have abandoned Chalcedon are those by Schoonenberg, Schillebeeckx¹ and Küng². Some major publications from Protestant theologians who also abandoned Chalcedon include those by Flesseman and Robinson. Amongst the contemporary theologians, Pannenberg

¹ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, Translated by John Bowden. New York: Seabury/Crossroad, 1980.

² Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*. Trans Quinn, London: Collins, E 1977.

has also registered his protest against Chalcedon. For him Chalcedon is unavoidably dualistic. Dunn and Bauer³ have also expressed dissatisfaction about applying Chalcedon as point of reference for Christological assessment.⁴

Some African theologians, particularly Pobee have also registered protest against the Chalcedonian Creed.

The emphasis on contextualisation in African Theological discourse has led to the emergence of different forms of African Christology. One may identify especially two main types of African Christology, namely liberation Christology and enculturation Christology. African women's Christology may be regarded as a distinct type of Christology, but is often included under the rubric of liberation Christologies. The variety of African Christologies may be regarded as the legitimate result of the process of contextualisation since African theologians have at particular times addressed pertinent issues in different African contexts. In the African discourse on Christology a number of images and titles for Jesus have emerged. These include, amongst others, descriptions of Jesus Christ as: *Ancestor, Chief, Divine conqueror, Elder, Healer, Master of initiation, Elder, brother, Liberator, Guest, and Priest.*⁵

One of the fundamental aspects of the Christian confession of faith as formulated by the Council of Chalcedon (451) is that, Jesus Christ is "truly God" (*vere Deus*) as well as "truly human" (*vere homo*) and that the relationship between these two claims may be

³ Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*. London: SCM, 1972.

⁴ James Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of the Earliest Christianity*. London: SCM, 1977

⁵ Robert J. Schreiter, *Faces of Jesus in Africa*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, (ed) 1991.

understood in terms of the one “person” and the two “natures” of Jesus Christ.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Some theologians have critiqued Pobee’s view on Chalcedon confession by expressing their dissatisfaction about his opposition of the Creed and the New Testament. Pobee in particular, argues that both the New Testament and the Creed agree on the essentials of Christology, namely humanity and Divinity of Jesus Christ. Pobee’s claims that functional Christology fits better within the [Akan] African context than ontological Christology, which is the characteristic of Chalcedon, raises a question on nature of Jesus’ ‘divinity’.⁶ However, the relationship between Pobee’s view and the Chalcedon’s Confession has not been adequately addressed.

What is the relationship between Pobee’s Christology and the Nicene/Chalcedon confessional of the person of Christ?

1.3 Hypothesis

Some ideas of John Pobee on the divinity of Jesus differ from the ideas of the Chalcedon confession of the divinity of Jesus.

1.4 Objectives

The study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

a) To ascertain the differences/dissimilarities between the African Christian Christology

⁶ John S. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*. Nashville: Abingdon 1979.

and Chalcedon Confession of the person of Christ, with particular reference to John Pobee.

b) To assess the emerging African Christologies which appear to differ from the Chalcedon Confession.

1.5 Methodology

The study is basically a textual and conceptual analysis. The sources of data were secondary data from journal publications, books as well as other internet sources. The materials are examined and presented in six steps:

The first gives an overview of the decision of the Council of Chalcedon on the person of Christ. The decisions of the preceding Councils are also sketched.

Second step describes and analyses Pobee's view on the person of Christ, primarily from his book, *Towards an African Christian Theology*. His view on the relationship between The New Testament Christology and the Chalcedon Confession of the person of Christ is explored.

The third examines Christological discourses in African Christian theology. It describes and evaluates their compatibility with the Chalcedon Christology. Here the aim is not to dismiss African Christological titles because they do not adequately captures Chalcedon confession. Rather, the intension is to assess their compatibility with the Ecumenical creed.

The fourth step, which is the key text chapter, describes Pobee's view on the person of

Christ in detail. Both Jesus' humanity and divinity is examined but more attention is given the divinity aspect.

Fifthly, Pobee's view of Jesus' divinity is critically analysed and compared to Chalcedonian confession of Christ.

Finally, theological and evangelical relevance of the Chalcedonian Christology is assessed.

1.6 Significance

Chalcedon definition of person of Christ which was formulated in the 5th century in the Western Christian and philosophical context serve as the official dogma for most Christian groups in Africa. The study seeks to find out how the emerging African Christian theology in 21st century is relating to this ecumenical dogma with reference to Pobee as a key African theologian.

Findings from this study will serve as a reference material to other students and theologians pursuing similar studies

1.7 Scope

The study is limited to the exploration of John Pobee's view on Christ's relations to the Chalcedon definition of the person of Christ. The study aims only to find out the similarities and dissimilarities between the two. The contentious issue of whether the Chalcedon definition of the person of Christ must be the Christological reference point for African Christianity would not be addressed in this study.

1.8 Organization of the study

The study will be organized in six main chapters. Chapter one will be the general overview of the study which include an introduction, problem statement, objectives, scope of the study and methodology of the study. Chapter two entails an overview of the decision of the Council of Chalcedon on the person of Christ. The decisions of the preceding Councils are also sketched. Chapter three discusses Christological titles in African Christian theology.

Chapter four gives details description of Pobee's view on the person of Christ; humanity and divinity. The fifth chapter compares and analyses the two views to find out the similarities and dissimilarities. Chapter six elaborates on the findings from the study, assess their theological implications and make recommendations to inform future studies and practice.

CHAPTER 2

The Council of Chalcedon and the person of Christ

2.1 Introduction

One of the fundamental aspects of the Christian confession of faith as formulated by the Council of Chalcedon (451) is that, Jesus Christ is “truly God” (*vere Deus*) as well as “truly human” (*vere homo*) and that the relationship between these two claims may be understood in terms of the one “person” and the two “natures” of Jesus Christ. These are the core Christian confessions that Pobee’s Christology will be compared with. A brief description of these decisions within their own historical context will therefore have to suffice here. The intention here is not to engage in any comprehensive review of Nicene/Chalcedonian Christology. An exhaustive account of the person of Christ in this context will need a larger scale than what can be offered here. An attempt in this section is to sketch the (Nicene) Orthodox Christian beliefs concerning the person of Christ as defined by the credal statements of the ecumenical councils from the 4th and 5th centuries.⁷

The chapter is divided into four sections. In the first section (2.2), I have offered a brief description of the most important Christological decisions of the first three ecumenical councils of the patristic period, with specific reference to the decisions of Nicea (325), Constantinople (381) and Ephesus (431). Section 2.3 Chalcedon confession (451) of the person of Christ which is the main focus of the chapter. Section 2.4 concludes the chapter.

⁷ Jaroslav Pelikan, & Valerie Hotchkiss, *Creed and Confession of Faith in the Christian Tradition volume 1: Early, Eastern and Medieval*. New Haven: Yale University Press, (eds) 2003.

2.2. The Councils preceding Chalcedon: Nicea (325), Constantinople (381) and Ephesus (431)

The main agenda of the Council of Nicea (325) was to discuss Jesus' divinity. The theological issue at stake, or seemed to be, was the status of the "Logos" and His relation to the Godhead.⁸ The controversy arose from the difficulty of combining the divinity of Christ, the incarnate *Logos*, with the unity in God. Particularly, the Arian view of Christ as creature collided with the tradition of describing Jesus as true God. At the beginning of the problem statement, the Trinity as such was apparently not directly at stake. But, in the course of the controversy, it became clear that one cannot discuss Christology without entering into debates on the concept of God.⁹

Prior to the Council, there were some notable sects which had already denied the full divinity of Christ. The Ebionites taught that Jesus was not God, but a human prophet promised in the Old Testament.¹⁰ In the third century, Sabellius also stressed monotheism to the extent of declaring that *Logos* was a function of God the Father rather than a separate Person, but his view had comparatively few adherents. Another group, called the Adoptionists, taught that Jesus was an ordinary human being by nature but was adopted as God's Son because of the exemplary and dedicated life that he lived.¹¹ Origen also explicitly taught that the Son is subordinate to the Father.¹² The most immediate issue

⁸ John Norman Davidson Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1978:224

⁹ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*. 223

¹⁰ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*.139.

¹¹ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 40.

¹² Jaroslav Pelikan *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine. The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition, Vol. 1, 198, 1971(100–600).*

that led to the Council of Nicea was the controversy of Arius, an Alexandrian monk. The issue at stake was the status of the “Son” and his relation to God the Father. Arius accused Bishop Alexander of deviant teaching. That is, proclaiming the Son and the Father to be co-eternal.¹³

Arius contended that Jesus was divine, but that he was less divine than God the Father. For Arius, because the Son is “Son”, he is “begotten”, therefore he is *gen(n)etos*, but God is by definition *agen(n)etos*. The Son is therefore not, in any strict or proper sense, God. Thus the Son cannot be co-eternal with the Father.¹⁴

Arius also contended that “the Son had a beginning, but God is without beginning.” He therefore explicitly rejected the idea that the Son is *homoousios* with the Father and insisted that the Father is “different in ousia” from the Son.

Alexander (the Bishop of Alexandria) challenged Arius over this view, and this led to some controversies. The precise details of Alexander’s position are somewhat obscure in the account which Arius gave in his accusation letter concerning Alexander. However, the broad shape of Alexander’s position is clear enough. He held that the Father and the Son are co-eternal. The Son, though “begotten” (*gennetos*), in no way came into existence later than the “unbegotten” (*agennetos*) Father. The Son co-exists with the Father and emanates from the Father.

After the death of Alexander, Athanasius became Bishop of Alexandria. Nonetheless,

¹³ Henry Chadwick *The Early Church*. Middlesex: Penguin Books 1982:129

¹⁴ Colin Gunton, And in One Lord, Jesus Christ...Begotten, Not Made. In: Seitz, CR (ed) 2001. *Nicaene Christianity: The Future for New Ecumenism*, 35-48. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press. 2001:39-41

Arius' controversy led to the first ecumenical Council held at Nicea in AD 325. It was moderated by Emperor Constantine himself.¹⁵

In his response to Arius' views, Athanasius argues as follows: Firstly, Arianism undermined the Christian doctrine of God by presupposing that Jesus is not eternal and thereby virtually reintroducing polytheism. Secondly, Arius' view made nonsense of the established liturgical customs of baptising in the Son's name as well as the Father's, and addressing prayers to the Son. Thirdly, and most importantly, it undermined the Christian idea of redemption in Christ, since only if the Mediator was Himself divine could humankind hope to re-establish fellowship with God. Kelly contends that considerations like these may well have carried weight with the Council. After some deliberations, the Council arrived at a decision which affirmed the full divinity of Christ. The views which directly affected the full divinity of Jesus were therefore declared as heresies by the Council.¹⁶

The Council declared the Son to be co-essential with the Father.¹⁷ The key concept used to maintain the full divinity of Jesus was the Greek term *homoousios*. The characteristic Nicene emphases are: "true God from true God, begotten, not made, *homoousios* with the Father". The term does not stand alone, nor can it be adequately understood if it is isolated from its background and treated simply by itself.

Together, *ousia* and *homoousios* stress that the Son of God is himself authentically God,

¹⁵ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* 230- 232

¹⁶ Kelly (1978:233)

¹⁷ James Stevenson, *Creeds, Councils and Controversies: Documents Illustrative of the History of the Church A.D.* London: SPCK, 1966: 337-461.

that is, genuinely Son rather than a created being. He is, not “made” but “begotten”; his being derives from the being of the Father himself. He therefore shared the same essence with the Father.¹⁸ The phrase co-essential with the Father or “*homoousios* with the Father” recapitulates and focuses all the positive and negative affirmations in the Council of Nicea.¹⁹

The Council of Nicea formulated its teaching by drafting a new Creed which was to become the standard for orthodox faith. What we now know as the Nicene Creed is a later compilation which most likely dates from the Council of Constantinople of 380/1. However, this includes material from the earlier creed of Nicea. This earlier creed includes the following clauses:

We believe in one God ... and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father as unique (*monogenes*), that is from the *ousia* of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, *homoousios* with the Father, through whom all things were made ...

The rejection of Arius’ Christology is then to be found in the canon which immediately followed the Creed:

And those who say, “There was once when he was not,” and, “Before being begotten, he was not,” and that he came into being from nothing (*ex ouk onton*); or who declare that the Son of God is from some other hypostasis or *ousia* (sc. than the Father’s), or that he is a creature or changeable or alterable: the catholic Church anathematizes.²⁰

Arius was finally condemned and excommunicated. However, in the later years in the East, Arianism came to prevail.²¹ Nonetheless, the Western church in general was more

¹⁸ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 236

¹⁹ (Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 236 and Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, 201)

²⁰ The Council rejected Arius’ position most categorically, and left no loophole which would permit him and his allies to subscribe to the creed while maintaining their former position. As Arius had already rejected the notion of *homoousios*, the creed offered itself as a suitable instrument for this purpose.

²¹ Constantine’s son, Constantius who became the emperor embraced the views of the excommunicated presbyter Arius.

loyal to the definition of Nicea and regarded Athanasius as a defender of true doctrine.²²

b) The Council of Constantinople (381): The question of Jesus as truly human

Alongside the question of Jesus' divinity, a diametrically opposite Christological view known as docetism emerged which denied Jesus' humanity. Docetism has its roots in the Greco-Oriental assumptions about divine impassability and the inherent impurity of matter.²³

However, the main controversy that led to the Council of Constantinople was the Apollinarian controversy. The agenda of the Council of Constantinople (A.D.381) was to assert Christ's humanity without denying his divinity. The theological issue at stake was the status of the "Logos" and His relations to the Christ's humanity. The controversy arose from the difficulty of combining the intellect and will of *Logos* with that of Christ's human intellect and will.

On the one hand, we have the notion of the *Logos* which is fully divine in nature; on the other hand, Christ's human nature which is fully human in nature. If one assumes, as the Council of Nicea did, that the *Logos* has become flesh, then, it logically follows that either there are two natures (in the person of Christ) or one nature absorbs the rest of the other nature.

Following the latter view, we may then have a kind of "hybrid" in the person of Jesus. Apollinarius who was Bishop of Laodicea (ca.310-ca.390) and a strong supporter of *homoousion* theology held such a view. Apollinarius maintained that the *Logos* occupied

²² The council of Nicea was widely regarded as a watershed in the development of Christian teaching concerning Christ. Kelly, *The Early Church*, 238

²³ Kelly, *The Early Church*, 141.

the place of Christ's human spirit – performing the functions of intellect and will.

Such a view was not quite as new; Origen held a similar belief. According to Origen, it was the nature of the *Logos* which predominated in Christ. His conception occurred from the *Logos's* indwelling, and his whole life was under the direction of the *Logos*. The human soul was, in Origen's view, totally suffused with and caught up in the divine wisdom, goodness, truth and life. As Origen saw the matter, the *Logos* had in effect taken over the role of the governing principle of the Christ.

However, a group of three theologians known as the Cappadocian Fathers (Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa and the Gregory of Nazianzus) and also Athanasius rejected the proposed view of Apollinarius. Athanasius contended that rejection of a normal human psychology in Christ clashed with the biblical picture of a saviour who was limited in knowledge, and who suffered and underwent every kind of human experience. It was thus held that in Apollinarius' view, Jesus was not truly human, for his will was absorbed by the *Logos*.

Uppermost in the concern of Apollinarius' opponents was the advocacy of Christ as Saviour – his mediating role between God and humankind. In this regard, Gregory Nazianzus wrote: "If anyone has put his [sic – or her] trust in him without a human mind, he is really bereft of mind and quite unworthy of salvation. For that which he has not assumed he has not healed; but that which is united to his Godhead is also saved".²⁴

In 378 Apollinarianism was condemned at a council held in Rome – during the pontificate of Damasus (and with the support of the powerful Emperor Theodosius I).

²⁴ Stevenson, *Creeds, Councils and Controversies*, 98

Synods in the theological centres of the East also followed with condemnation; at Alexandria in 378 and Antioch in 379.²⁵

In May 381, Theodosius I called for a second ecumenical council to address the various Christological questions in a more formal way. The council was held in Constantinople. Some of the questions addressed by the Council can be posed as follows: Could Christ be said to be truly human without less being implied about his divinity than Nicea had already stated? How does the Spirit relate to the Father and to the Son?

After much deliberation, the Council formulated a revised creed and the formula known today as the Nicene Creed emerged:

We believe in one God, the father almighty, maker of heaven and earth of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ the only –begotten Son of God begotten from the father before all ages, light from light true God from true God begotten not made, of one substance, with the father through Whom all things came into existence, who because of us men and because of our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man, and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried, and rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures and ascended to heaven, and sits on the right hand of the father and will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead, of Whose kingdom there will be no end.

And in the Spirit the Lord life –giver, who proceeds from the father who with the father and the Son is together worshipped and together glorified, who spoke through the prophets in one holy Catholic and apostolic Church. We confess one baptism to the remission of sins, we look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. *Amen.*

At the Council of Constantinople (381) the Nicene faith was reaffirmed, and the various “Arianising” deviations were placed under a ban. Undoubtedly, the condemnation of Apollinarius’ view first and foremost emphasised the true humanity of Christ. Nonetheless, the Council also promulgated what came to be known as the doctrine of

²⁵ In A.D. 380, Emperor Theodosius issued an edict requiring his subjects to profess the orthodox faith of Nicea. He also raised Gregory Nazianzen to the patriarchal throne of Constantinople.

Trinity (Stevenson 1981).²⁶

Together, the Council of Nicea and Constantinople taught that Jesus was fully divine and also fully human. These Councils however did not clarify how one person could be both divine and human, and how the divine and human were related within that one person.

c) The Council of Ephesus (431): The question of Christ's two natures in one person

The Councils of Nicea (325) and Constantinople (381) legislated on the questions of Jesus Christ's deity and humanity. However, the debates about the *precise nature* of Christ's divinity and humanity began to surface.

The first major controversy on Christ's two natures combined in one person, concerned Apollinarianism, started by Apollinarius.²⁷ The second major controversy and also the immediate event that led to the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus concerned Nestorianism. Nestorius was Bishop of Constantinople from 428. He emerged from the Antioch school. He opposed a theological and devotional slogan *theotokos* – St Mary as the God bearer or “Mother of God”.

Nestorius was concerned with the thought that God might be seen to have had a new beginning of some sort or that God suffered or died. To Nestorius, none of these could befall the infinite God. Therefore, instead of the God-man unity, he taught that there was the Logos, and the man, whom the logos assumed. He favoured the term Christ-bearer (*Christotokos*) as a summary of Mary's role. Or perhaps, Mary should be named both

²⁶ Henry Bettenson, *The Early Christian Fathers: A Selection from the Writings of the Fathers from St. Clement Of Rome to St. Athanasius*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956.

²⁷ The major historical controversies on the notion of Christ's two natures in one person are: Apollinarianism, *Nestorianism*, Eutycheanism, Monophysitism and Monothelitism (see Cameron 1978).

God-bearer and Man-bearer to emphasise Christ's dual natures. Nestorius was accused of teaching a double personality pertaining to Christ: two natures and two distinct persons. Nestorius' main antagonist was Bishop Cyril of Alexandria.

This controversy led to the third ecumenical Council which was convened at Ephesus in 431. So violent was the controversy that the Council of Ephesus could not reach a doctrinal formula. It took two further years before the two sides struggled their way through to a common formula.

At the Council of Ephesus, the Fathers wanted to maintain Cyril's basic Christological idea as expressed in his second letter to Nestorius.²⁸ According to the Council Fathers, this means that Jesus Christ is one and the same who is eternally begotten of the Father and was born of Mary, in time, as a man. The Council's concern here was exactly the same as had already been decisive in Nicea: God himself meets us in Jesus Christ.

Nonetheless, a new item was added by the Ephesus decision pertaining to the identity of the one subject who from eternity resides with the Father and who in time has become human. Therefore both what is divine and what is human must be predicated to Jesus Christ.

Thus we can and must say that Mary is the mother of God (*Theotokos*). In this respect, the Council of Ephesus formulated that Christ has two natures in one person as against the assumed view of Nestorius, that, Christ has a double personality: Two natures and two persons.

Another issue that came up was the question whether Jesus' humanity is to be

²⁸ The Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed speaks first of the eternal Son of God consubstantial with the Father, and then goes on: "For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven. He was made flesh and was made man."

worshipped. The Council maintained that Jesus' humanity is not to be worshipped as if it were a different subject – only together with the *Logos* but both are glorified in single worship. The Christological orthodoxy formulated at Ephesus was therefore less theoretical or doctrinal. Correct prayer and correct liturgical worship became the yardsticks and criteria for correct belief.

2.3 The Council of Chalcedon (451): The limits of the doctrine of the Person of Christ

The most important event in all the controversies concerning the person of Christ was the Council of Chalcedon, held in 451. The Council promulgated a Christological doctrine known as “hypostatic union”. In short, this doctrine states that two natures, one human and one divine, are united in the *one person* of Christ (*unio personales*). The Council further taught that each of these natures, the human and the divine, was distinct and complete.

The Council of Chalcedon was the largest council and was the last one acknowledged as “Ecumenical” by all branches of the church (excluding the Nestorian and Monophysitism churches). This Council re-condemned Eutyches, condemned Diocorus, declared Flavian a martyr, and supported the Tome of Leo and Cyril of Alexandria's second letter to Nestorius. The Council also (for reasons that had more to do with asserting their authority) wrote up a new creed.

The immediate event that led to the Council of Chalcedon was the controversy over Eutycheanism. Eutyches (375-454), an archimandrite (monastic superior) from Constanti-

nople was not satisfied with the prevailing climate after the condemnation of Nestorius. He began to teach a form of what would later be called monophysitism, namely that Christ has one nature rather than two after the incarnation – therefore the God-man was to be seen as a single being (where the superiority of the divine over the human nature is emphasised).

Eutyches would not acknowledge the human nature of Christ but only that “his body is consubstantial with ours”. He believed that the humanity of Jesus was absorbed by the divinity in the same person. Based on such a contention, Flavian (449) bishop of Constantinople, summoned Eutyches to a synod in November 448. At the synod, Eutyches was questioned on his contentions. He neither denied nor retreated from his claims. Instead, he maintained that his doctrine was orthodox and expressed the faith of Cyril, Athanasius and Nicea.

However, the inquirers believed that his doctrine led to a different kind of humanity for Christ than our humanity. The Fathers therefore maintained that such a view will lead to the conclusion that Christ could not save us because he was not fully human. Eutyches was therefore condemned. Afterwards, the Council framed a new creed known as the formula of Chalcedon. The core of that statement reads as follows:

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 and complete in manhood , truly God and truly man consisting also of a reasonable soul and body of one substance (*homousious*) 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 (Theotokos); 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 was handed down to us.²⁹

The Chalcedonian Creed is regarded as orthodox by the mainstream church. It became a point of reference for all other Christologies. However, there were again some controversies. The first major controversy after Chalcedon was around monophysitism. This controversy came about because several sectors of the church, especially the Egyptian churches, never accepted the decisions of Chalcedon. They maintained that Christ has “one nature” after the incarnation, hence the name monophysite. These groups eventually moulded into separate churches that did not recognise the formula of the Council of Chalcedon (451).

While the controversy with monophysitism was still pending, another controversy referred to as monothelitism also came up. Monothelitism refers to the doctrine that Christ had only one will. This is contrary to Chalcedon’s confession that Christ possessed both a human and a divine will. The supporters of monothelitism accepted the doctrine of two natures, nevertheless, and tried to help bridge the gap between orthodox and monophysite views – by proposing that Christ had only one will. Thus, their position became akin to that of monophysites: “one nature” after the incarnation in one person. However, this view was also condemned by the Third Council of Constantinople (the Sixth Ecumenical Council, 680-681).

2.4. Conclusion

²⁹ Bettenson, *The Early Christian Fathers: A Selection from the Writings of the Fathers from St. Clement Of Rome to St. Athanasius*, 51-52

The Chalcedonian Creed which states that Christ was true God and true human in two natures but was one person (also called the hypostatic union) did not put an end to Christological debates. Nevertheless, it did clarify the terms used and became a point of reference for those who adhered to the Chalcedonian formula.

CHAPTER 3

African Christian Theology and the Person of Christ

3.1 Introduction

The discourses on the person of Christ follows from the titles attributed to Jesus Christ in the biblical texts such as: Messiah, Kurios, Son of Man and Son of God, Lord and others. In the African discourses on Christology a number of images and titles for Jesus have also emerged. In chapter 2, what constitute Chalcedon Christology was detailed. This chapter gives an overview of the key African Christological titles. These include, amongst others, descriptions of Jesus Christ as ancestor, chief, elder healer, elder brother, liberator, and priest.³⁰

3.2 The Person of Christ in African Christian theology

Amongst contemporary African theologians who have engaged in the task of doing Christology from within an African context, one may mention the contributions by Charles Nyamiti, Douglas W. Waruta, Francios Kabasèlè, John Mbiti, Jesse Mugambi, Jean-Marc Ela, and many others. Within the Ghanaian context, contributions to an African Christology have come from Abraham Akrong, Kwame Bediako, Kofi Appiah-Kubi , Peter Kwasi Sarpong and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, and John Pobee.³¹

The contributions on Christology have also led to the emergence of different forms of

³⁰ Schreiter, *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, 20

³¹ Schreiter, *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, 24

African Christology. These Christologies correspond to two of the dominant schools of contemporary African Christian theology, namely liberation³² and inculturation theologies. The first two of the images discussed in this chapter comes under liberation Christologies which place the emphasis on African political and socio-economic problems. The other three images come under inculturation Christologies which stress a traditional African religion, culture and worldview.³³

a) Liberation Christological images: Christ as Healer and Liberator

The earliest African theologians writing about liberation theology were Jean-Marc Ela and Eboussi Boulaga and Laurenti Magesa. Apart from the obvious Africanisation of their message, the emphasis on liberation from poverty and the role of the poor is very much akin to Latin American liberation theology. A stronger emphasis is placed on the importance of critical thinking in Latin American liberation theology – an element not always emphasised by other African theologians. There is, however, in addition to the emphasis on economic liberation, an increasing tendency on the part of African theologians to speak of liberation from all oppressive forces, including cultural ones. This is particularly seen in the work of Ela³⁴. Mpolo³⁵ an African feminist argues that the ministry of Jesus clearly indicates his commitment to liberate the oppressed from every

³² African feminist Christology falls in this group. See Amoah and Oduyoye (1988:35-46) and Oduyoye (1986). For feminist Christology in general, see Johnson (1990, 1997) and Fiorenza (2000).

³³ Schreiter, *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, 26

³⁴ Jean-Marc Ela, *African Cry*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986:39-53

³⁵ Reginald Stober Mpolo, & Evelyn Appiah, *An African Call for Life: A Contribution to the World Council of Churches' Sixth Assembly Theme: "Jesus Christ – The Life of the World"*. Nairobi: Uzima Press for the World Council of Churches, 1983.

form of oppression.

The African women's Christology focuses on the emancipation of women. Central to the Christological reflection of African women theologians is the experience of women in patriarchal society and male-dominated churches. The focus is placed on structures in African societies that oppress women and that tend to marginalise the role that Jesus Christ plays in liberating African women. While accepting the liberation approach to Christology, most women reject the cultural approach because they see African traditional culture as partly responsible for contemporary structures of oppression.

Nevertheless, both African women's Christology and the mainline liberation Christological methods focus primarily on the role or functions of Christ as Liberator and healer. Indeed such images have a basis in the Scriptures and are relevant within the African context.

The strengths of the image of Jesus as Liberator lies in the notion of God's "preferential option" for the poor – which the Gospel of Luke, for example, clearly demonstrates. Added to that, the need within the African context for a liberator as an antidote for the feared spiritual forces and all forms of oppression cannot be over-emphasised. However, the image of Jesus as typically portrayed in African liberation Christology is merely that of a charismatic leader or lesser divinity. This is an approach where Jesus is seen in functional terms as a liberator without any reference to his divinity, though divinity is not necessarily excluded. This approach is primarily based on the role or functions that Christ fulfills. In this sense, Christ is an ideal person whose life should be imitated, or is taken to be a liberator who liberates human beings from all kinds of oppression. The advocates of this image have not in any way shown how such a liberator can be fully human and fully

divine – as the Nicene / Chalcedon definition confesses. In this respect, such an approach seems inadequate to construct the doctrine of Christ as a whole in light of Christianity Nicene and Chalcedon confessed.

b) Inculturation Christological images: Christ as an Ancestor, Priest, Chief and Linguist

Jesus as an Ancestor: Of the various images of Jesus Christ emerging in African Christology, the image of ancestor seems to be dominant. More attention has been given to ancestorhood as a way of “Africanising” Jesus than to almost any other image.³⁶ The category of ancestor is of particular interest because it focuses not only on one aspect of Jesus’ work, but also on the person of Christ. The traditions venerating (or “worshipping”) ancestors in Africa are strong and widespread throughout the African continent. However, when the category of “ancestor” is applied to Jesus, it needs to be qualified. Jesus is not just one of our ancestors, but the Ancestor par excellence, humanity’s unique ancestor.

African theologians have depicted or qualified Christ’s ancestorship in varied ways. For example, for Efoe Penoukou writing within the context of the Ewe-Mina of Togo, Christ is *ancestre-joto* (source of life). For Benezet Bujo of Congo, Jesus Christ is the proto-ancestor. Charles Nyamti of Tanzania has written more than most on the topic of Christ as ancestor. For him Jesus Christ is both our brother and our ancestor, or better put: our brother-ancestor. For Francois Kabasèlè, also of the Congo, Jesus Christ is an elder

³⁶ Joseph Boakye Danquah, *Ancestors, Heroes and God: The Principles of Akan-Ashanti Ancestor-Worship and European Hero-Worship*. Kebi, Gold Coast, 1938

brother- ancestor. Writing within the context of the Akan society in Ghana, John Pobee, presents Jesus as *Nana*, “the Great and Greatest Ancestor.”³⁷

Theologically, the image of Christ as ancestor downplays the doctrine of the bodily resurrection of Jesus since this could not apply to any other ancestors. This image also conflicts with the doctrine of Trinity since the ancestors are not divine or worshipped together with the Supreme Being. The image of Jesus as ancestor also does not offer an account of the divinity of Jesus Christ.

Jesus as a priest: The institution of the priesthood is a highly respected office in traditional West African societies. This institution is open to both men and women.³⁸ The primary function of priests amongst the Akan is mediation. Priests mediate not only between the devotees and the lesser divinity and the ancestors, but also between human beings. This image of priest therefore makes the mediator role of Christ meaningful within the Akan context. The priests are believed to have power over evil spirits and to set human beings free from the yoke of evil. In addition to the religious role, the priests also play a part in the political, social and economic spheres. In some places, priests may double as chiefs. Their blessings are also solicited in almost all socio-economic undertakings.

As spiritual leaders of the entire community, a certain standard of moral and social behaviour is expected of priests. Although some priests may fall short of this standard, many others maintain the high traditions of their office and are honest, trustworthy and devoted to their calling. Amongst those who have made such suggestions are Bediako,

³⁷ Schreiter, *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, 18

³⁸ Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*. Singapore: FEP International private, 1978:74.

Waruta, Wairimu and Pobee.³⁹

Jesus as a linguist (*okyeame*): In most African societies the idea and work of a mediator or intermediary implies routine. Among the Akan of Ghana, the king or the chief does not generally speak directly to the people, neither do the people normally approach the king or chief directly except through the linguist. The linguist receives and transmits the message from the king to the people and vice versa.

In the Akan court the linguist (*okyeame*) is a highly important personality. He remains close to the chief, relaying his requests and pronouncements to others and even sometimes acting for him in his absence. This institution has become part of the social order. Thus, amongst the Akan, the *okyeame* is not just a speech intermediary. He is envoy, counsellor, consultant, protocol officer, as well as ritual officiant responsible for libation prayers. Whether Akan or not, it is clear that the royal spokesperson, wherever he has been found in Ghana, is the chief's close confidant and the most reliable among the chief's council of elders. Amongst the Ashanti (the dominant group in the Akan), the *okyeame* is the royal spokesperson and prosecutor in court. In the Akan system of rule, the *okyeame* can be either male or female. Certainly, such a rich background makes the image of a linguist as mediator meaningful as a Christological image applicable to the Akan context.

3.3 Assessment

This chapter offers a review of the dominant Christological images which have emerged

³⁹ Schreiter, *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, 18

within the context of recent African Christian theologies. The purpose of such a review is not to provide a comprehensive discussion of the complex discourse on an African Christology. It is rather to offer a brief description of some of the dominant images with reference to Chalcedonian confession of the person of Christ. The strengths and the weaknesses of these Christologies are assessed in terms of their continuity with the Christological decisions of the ecumenical councils of Nicea and Chalcedon on the person and work of Christ.

Jesus as reconfigured ancestor

This approach implies an attempt to reconfigure a human being into a divine one in order to express both Jesus' humanity and divinity. Here we become aware of some sensitivity to the doctrinal importance as a complement to appropriating the proposal to the African context. Examples are found in some approaches in ancestor Christology. In such proposals, the humanity of Jesus is accepted as axiomatic – it is the divinity which must be demonstrated. There is no African Christological development along these lines which has done justice to the divinity of Christ in accordance with the Nicene confessional definition. Such attempts either run the risk of adoptionism or Arianism. If one starts from a finite being and elevates the image to the status of divinity, one inevitably runs the risk of adoptionism. Alternatively, if one poses an already existing divine being, one may also either import the image of a lesser divinity – Arianism or run the risk of modalism, by viewing the Supreme Being in terms of a Christological image.

Jesus as human mediator

The second approach poses Jesus as human mediator between God and humankind. The images of master of initiation, linguist, chief, and priest, are usually used in this regard. However, these images are known to represent only human beings. Nonetheless, this approach shows some developments along the line of the functional divinity of Christ.

However, the problem with the approach focusing on functional divinity is that it tends to depict Jesus as the highest embodiment of God ever found in any human being. This essentially reduces Christ's existence to the status of merely a human being. There are several forms of functional Christology, but basic to all these forms is that they contrast the functional divinity of Jesus against his essential divinity. Nevertheless, the Nicene-Chalcedon confessional definition of the person of Christ entails that Jesus is "of the same nature with God".

It is very important to note the following insight. To reduce Jesus to merely a human being or to reduce Christ's divinity to only the function of God is to deprive Christ's sacrifice of its infinite merit. For a mere human being cannot atone for the sins of humankind. Moreover, a mere human being does not deserve worship. It is in this respect that Pelikan noted that, amid all the varieties of Christian response to the Gnostic systems, the Fathers were sure that the Redeemer did not belong to some lower order of divine reality, but was himself God.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine (Centuries)*, 103.

Jesus as functional Liberator

Firstly, there is an approach where Jesus is seen in functional terms as a liberator without any reference to his divinity, though divinity is not necessarily excluded.

This approach is primarily based on the role or functions that Christ fulfills. In this sense, Christ is an ideal person whose life should be imitated, or is taken to be a liberator who liberates human beings from all kinds of oppression. The oppression could pertain to structural evils that dehumanize people, or culture and traditions that enslave underlings or even to perceive evil spirits that deceive and torment people. However, such an approach seems badly inadequate to express the person of Christ as truly human as well as truly God as affirmed by the Councils of Nicea and Chalcedon. One hardly constructs an adequate Christology just on some aspect of the role or functions that Jesus played.

For example, if one should follow Christ because he is healer, liberator or a mere moral example, such an approach also serves as basis for people to follow other spiritual leaders with similar “charisma”. The intention here is not to say that the approach focusing on the function or role model is “wrong”. Rather, it cannot account for the “being” of Christ which is essential for the right picture of Christ’s person and salvific work.

The affirmation of the ecumenical Council of Nicea (325) was that Jesus Christ is both “fully human” and “fully divine”. This had countered a number of “heresies” in which either the divinity of Jesus (see *subordinationism*, *Arianism*) or the humanity of Christ (see *docetism*/*Ebionism*) was underplayed or denied.

3.4 Conclusion

Drawing from African background, some African theologians have suggested that Jesus could be seen as ancestor, chief, elder healer, elder brother, liberator, priest, *okyeame* amongst the Africans. Remarkably, these images in the African context do not go beyond human beings. Those who advocate such an image have therefore not in any way shown how these could be seen as fully divine.

CHAPTER 4

John Pobee on the person of Christ

4.1 Introduction

Profile of J. S Pobee

The Rev. Canon Prof (Emeritus) J.S. Pobee was born on 9th July, 1937. His academic education started at the then University College of the Gold Coast (a college of the University of London, (1957-1961) and was awarded Honours Degree in Divinity. He continued with his studies at Selwyn College, University of Cambridge in England University of Ghana (1961 – 1966), specializing in New Testament – Tripos Part III. His research Thesis Topic was Martyrological Aspects of St. Paul's Theology. He thereafter enrolled into Westcott House (1963 – 1964), Cambridge, England and trained for the Anglican Priesthood.

To further his competence in the study of Theology he did a year's course in German at the Goethe Institute, Passau in German in 1964. He joined the University of Ghana as a Lecturer in the Department of Study of Religions and was appointed Senior Lecturer in 1972, becoming an Associate Professor in 1977. From 1976 to 1980, he was Associate Director, Humanities Programme and Population Dynamics Programme at Legon. He was appointed Head of Department, Study of Religions from 1978 to 1983, Dean, Faculty of Arts (Legon) 1979 – 1983 and appointed a Full Professor in 1981. Prof. Pobee was also Fellow and Scholar-in-Residence at the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research, St. John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota, USA.

Academic Awards

Prof. Pobee won several Academic Awards and Prizes between 1960 and 1989. Some of the several Awards include the Cochrane Prize, London 1960; S.P.C.K. Prize for theology 1961; Goethe Institute Prize 1964 and 1965 the Appleton Prize, Selwyn College, Cambridge England.

In 1983, Prof. Pobee was elected a Member of Deutsche Gesellschaft Fnr Missionswissenschaft, and in 1988 elected Member, Board of Scholars of The Life University of Ghana and Peace Institute, Uppsalla, Sweden. From 1985 to 1988 he was the Vice President, International Association of Mission Studies and became the Associate President from 1988 to 1992. He delivered Lectures to reputable gatherings on several occasions few of which are Dr. Thomas Mar Athanasius, Suffragan, Metropolitan Memorial Lectures 1988; Hale Lecturer at Seabury Western Seminary, Evanston in 1988 and Annual Students' Lectureship on Mission for 1989/90 Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey in 1989. Most of these were carried out under the auspices of the World Council of Churches.

Teaching Experience

His teaching experience spans over more than three decades starting as a part-time Tutor in New Testament Studies at Selwyn and Magdalene Colleges both in Cambridge, through the University of Ghana from 1963 to 2000 when he retired as Professor Emeritus.

Guest Lecturer

He lectured in Universities/Seminaries in the USA, United Kingdom, The Caribbean, Europe, Latin America and Africa between 1975 and 1992.

Work Experience

He served on University Boards in Ghana between 1968 and 1974. He also served on Boards and Councils of the Anglican Church in Ghana, Ecumenical Boards and Committees, Theological Educational Boards and edited several Articles and Books. He served on several National and International Educational Committees, was a University of Ghana examiner for the West African Examinations Council, attended numerous Conferences at which he either delivered papers, chaired sessions or served on Planning Committees.

Writings

His writings run into volumes including Books, Articles and Papers. He has to his credit about twenty-four (24) self-authored books, edited twenty-three (23) works and contributed about one hundred and twenty-three (123) chapters in books. His published articles in Journals number one hundred and seventeen (117).

This chapter focuses on Pobee's Christology within the broader African Christological discourses. The strengths and the weaknesses of these Christological titles and points of view are assessed in terms of their continuity with the Christological decisions of the ecumenical councils of Nicea and Chalcedon on the person and work of Christ.

4.2 John Pobee on Humanity of Jesus

For Pobee the humanity of Jesus is one aspect of New Testament Christology which the attempt to construct a Christology in an African theology cannot skip. But what does it mean to say Jesus was human? Pobee notes that whatever else Jesus was, he was like

other men in that a woman brought him into the world. Like any other human being, he was born. According to Paul, “When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to... (Galatians 4:4-5 RSV). And precisely his mother, father, brothers, and sisters were known (Mark 6:1-6). He was a Jew, whatever else he was. His lineage was traced through David (Roman 1:3). In short, he was a personality in history.⁴¹

However, to Pobe, the birth of Jesus is the least important in establishing his humanity. He argues that, the lower creation also gives birth. Besides, in Semitic as in African societies it was believed that it is possible for divinities to take human form. Thus, birth as evidence for Jesus’ humanity is not only inconclusive evidence of the humanity of Jesus but also it raises problems by the biblical claims that Jesus’ birth was miraculous – Virgin Birth.

Pobe then points to what he deems as more and clearer indications of the humanity of Jesus. He contends that the evidences for Jesus’ humanity settle down to:

- a) his anthropological make-up being soul, flesh, and body;
- b) his finitude in terms of his knowledge and power;
- c) and his deep consciousness of total dependence on God.

⁴¹ Pobe, *Toward an African Theology*. 83

a) Jesus' anthropological make-up

Jesus, being a man, had a spirit, without which he was dead. By having a spirit, he was a living human being (Matthew 27:50). Jesus was also flesh, by virtue of which he was tempted like all human beings.

Pobee explains that in biblical anthropology flesh in reference to Jesus' humanity means he was weak and potentially capable of sinning (Roman8:3). Jesus, like other men, was flesh and therefore potentially capable of sinning, sharing with the rest of mankind the consequences of being in the flesh. However, Jesus was unique in that as a result of his singular devotion to the will of God, to the bitterest end of the death on the cross (Mark 14:36; Philippians 2:7-8), he remained sinless. He put up a successful fight against the downward pulling forces resulting from being in the flesh.

Again, as a man he was body in the sense that he had a personality of his own and shared corporeality with other human beings. It was that personality that continued to make an impression on his disciples after his death. And by virtue of being a body, he lived as a man in a community and society of human.

b) Jesus' finitude in terms of his knowledge and power

Pobee also contends that, Jesus the Son of God lacked omniscience and therefore was genuinely human. In his finitude he declared that "...no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mark 13:32). His finitude was fully demonstrated by his death – his mortality is the loudest witness to his humanity. God does not die! Still more important in understanding Jesus' humanity is the fact that he was subject to the limitations of all human beings. Thus there was limit to his knowledge.

c) Jesus' deep consciousness of total dependence on God

His finitude was well demonstrated by the fact that whatever power he wielded, he acknowledged as being derived from and dependent on God. His prayers, e.g. John 14:28 and John 17, also bear witness to his dependence on God, hence his prayers to God before and after healing. For Pobee that it would be logically inconsistent for God to pray to God. Pobee notes that the New Testament narratives about Jesus' humanity as outlined above could well be understood within African, particularly Akan context.⁴²

4.3 Pobee on divinity of Jesus

a) Jesus' divinity is on the relation of God to man – functional divinity

It is generally accepted by scholars that Jesus did not explicitly state that he was God. Pobee notes that, even, the Fourth Gospel, which boldly asserts that “the Word was God,” at no point speculates how the Word was. Divinity and humanity are next door to each other, thus the emphasis is on the relation of God to man. The more important issue is what the Word does, for that is, so to speak, a window onto his divinity.⁴³

He argues that Jesus' divinity is sensed or deduced from his operations, that is his functions, in the world. And so, the emphasis is on God's relation to man rather than on any metaphysical status as confessed by the Nicene – Chalcedonain Creed. Clearly the

⁴² Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 83

⁴³ Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 82

divinity of Jesus is expressed in his activity, his total devotion to the will of God, thereby keeping intact and to the fullest the *Imago Dei*.

Pobee buttresses his point by saying that nowhere do we find the idea that the Word is Second God in any Hellenistic sense. Despite John 1:1, there is no personal identification of the Word with the Father. Thus Pobee categorically states that “Jesus’ divinity is described in functional terms.” – as against ontological divinity confessed by the Nicene-Chalcedonian Creed.⁴⁴

b) The term “God” is used of Jesus only in liturgical formulas

Pobee again argues that, “God” is used of Jesus only in liturgical formulas and rarely, if ever, in narrative and epistolary literature. According to Pobee, John 1:2, 8; 20:28; Romans 9:5; Hebrews 1:8 and II Peter 1:1, are in either hymns or doxologies, and they differs from the creeds. Obviously, there is restraint, almost reluctance, in using “God” of Jesus of Nazareth. Thus the divinity of Jesus was primarily expressed not through a description of his activities in a manner reminiscent of the activities of God the Father.⁴⁵

c) The divinity of Jesus is mirrored through his humanity

Having taken such position, functional Christology, Pobee explain that, the divinity of Jesus is to some extent mirrored through his humanity. In Jesus the disciples saw what man is meant to be, i.e., Jesus is the *Imago Dei*. The determinative theological moment came when the disciples were compelled to say: “What I see in this Man commands my

⁴⁴ Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 82

⁴⁵ Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 84

worship. What I see in him changes my concept of God. What I have seen in terms of his Manhood I now recognize as Divinity, my Lord and my God.

To start with, Jesus was sinless. In the Synoptic Gospels, we learn how Jesus was tempted soon after his baptism to use wrong methods for God's purposes and his triumph over these temptations. When God created man, man was "in the image and likeness of God". He was as God. What marred the *Imago Dei* was sin, man's egocentricity and disobedience. Unlike the rest of humanity, Jesus shunned sin and consequently continued to be as God. He is the authentic man bearing the *Imago Dei*. It was as man that he achieved sinlessness and thus came to be seen as divine.⁴⁶

d) Sinlessness is an aspect of Jesus' divinity

Sinlessness is an aspect of Jesus' divinity. For as Jesus himself put it, "No one is good but God alone" (Mark 10:18 RSV). And "the sinlessness is an aspect of Jesus ... does not turn on the absence of human frailty but in a constantly renewed victory over temptations".

The famous kenotic passage of Philippians 2 also mentions how Jesus, unlike Adam, was obedient to the will of God even to his death on the cross, a scandal to many. But perhaps the quaint language of Hebrews 4:15 is unbeatable: Jesus is "one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (RSV).

⁴⁶ Pobe, *Toward an African Theology*, 84

This message affirms both the humanity of Jesus as one potentially capable of sinning, and his divinity because he did not yield to temptation and remained sinless. However, sinlessness does not exhaust the meaning of the *imago Dei*.

Jesus wielded authority and power, divine power. The authority he exhibited over nature and sickness was his by virtue of his perfected humanity. One demonstration of his authority and power is the cures he performed. Of course, contemporary exorcists performed cures which tended to be looked upon as marvels. Through the miracles of Jesus, the reign of God was manifested in the world. And that said something of who Jesus was – he wielded the power of God. Miracles were a sign of God’s power with Jesus to heal and save (Luke 11:20; Matthew 12:28).

Another aspect of the authority of Jesus is expressed by the description of Jesus as Creator. The classic statement of it is John 1:3: “through him all things came to be; no single thing was created without him” (NEB). Other passages are Roman 11:36, Colossians 1:16, I Corinthians 8:6. True life derives from God through Christ. Pobe explains that Jesus is Creator in two senses: first, he is the efficient cause of creation; and second, he is an example and model for the rest of mankind. By virtue of being the agent of creation, Jesus has claims on all men (John 17:2). That is precisely why Jesus is the judge of the world. His judgment pertains to salvation and condemnation (John 3:17, 19; 12:48). Consequently, Jesus has prerogative dignity, exercising the function of God as judge.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Pobe, *Toward an African Theology* 87

e) The divinity of Jesus is expressed in terms of eternity

The divinity of Jesus is also expressed in terms of eternity. Eternity describes time that is not measurable or determinable. In describing him as the agent of Creation we have already implied his existence before the world. Jesus Christ was preexistent because he had pre-creational glory in the fellowship of the Father (John 17:5; 1:3, 18; Philippians 2:5-6; Colossians 1:15-16). He is before Abraham, the great Patriarch of the Jews (John 8:58), as is asserted when Abraham is, in to have had a vision of him – while, at the same time, Abraham is, in a sense, his forerunner. And at the end, he will be there as judge. His life transcends his death.

We therefore discern the following elements in the divinity of Jesus –his sinlessness, his authority and power, not only as the agent of creation but also as judge at the end. And with these go his preexistence and eternity.

4.4 Conclusion

For Pobee the humanity and divinity of Jesus is one aspect of New Testament Christology which the attempt to construct a Christology in an African theology cannot skip. However, Pobee caution that expounding the divinity of Jesus is a far more difficult task than outlining Jesus' humanity. He contends that the New Testament, unlike the Nicene -Chalcedonian Creed, does not speculate about the metaphysical relationships within the Godhead. Thus, as Pobee sees it, there are differences between New Testament and Chalcedonian Christologies.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 82

CHAPTER 5

Pobee's view on Chalcedonian confession of Jesus: An Analysis

5.1 Introduction

This chapter offers an analysis of Pobee's Christology and how it relates to the Nicean-Chalcedon confession of the person of Christ. The purpose of such a reflection is not to provide a comprehensive discussion of the complex discourse on whether Chalcedonian Christology adequately captures the New Testament Christologies. It is rather to offer the view of an African Christian theologian, specifically John Pobee, on the relationship between the New Testament and Chalcedonian of the person of Christ. The analysis will be on thematic on major themes namely functional Christology and ontological Christology – as unveil in the Pobee's discussion of the two Christologies.

5.2 Jesus' divinity: Ontological or Functional Christology?

Ontology is a branch of philosophy that examines the study of being or existence. In Christology, ontology refers to the essence or being of Jesus in relations with the Father. Ontology is especially relevant in relation to the Godhead since Ecumenical Christianity attempt to articulate how the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all the same substance or essence. For the proponents of functional Christology, Christ's divinity is explained as functions of his humanity. A fully-fledged functional Christology made its

appearance in the early and mid-seventies, particularly in the publications of Cullmann⁴⁹ Küng and Robertson. In his classic book, *The Christology of the New Testament*, Cullman suggested that while the Greeks were more interested in nature or an ontological Christology, the Jewish people were more interested in a functional Christology.

In contrast to ontological Christology, functional Christology places a greater emphasis on the "deeds" or "actions" of the Messiah. Some of the visible actions of Jesus included the healing of the sick (Mark 1: 32-34), teaching authoritatively (Mark 1:21-22), forgiving sins (Mark 2:1-12), imparting eternal life (Acts 4:12), raising the dead (Luke 7:11-17; John 5:21; 6:40), and showing the ability to exercise judgment (Matt. 25:31-46). These "deeds" or "actions" demonstrate that Jesus is able to perform the same functions as the God of Israel.

a) Functional Christology

This view, well represent Pobee's position at least in his publications, especially: *Towards an African Christian Theology*. Pobee, in fact, states clearly that functional Christology fits better in Akan worldview than the Chalcedonian Christology which is the ontological Christology. Moreover, Pobee's explanation of the divinity of Christ captured here in three themes well denote that of functional Christology.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* 83

⁵⁰ Pobee, JS 1979. *Toward an African Theology* 119 -143

Firstly, for Pobee, Jesus' divinity is on the relation of God to man. It is generally accepted by scholars that Jesus did not explicitly stated that he was God. Pobee notes that, even, the Fourth Gospel, which boldly asserts that "the Word was God," at no point speculates how the Word was. He argues that in the New Testament, the divinity and humanity are next door to each other, and the emphasis is on the relation of God to man. Thus the divinity of Jesus was primarily expressed not through a description of his activities in a manner reminiscent of the activities of God the Father.⁵¹

Pobee emphatically states that, what the Word does is a window onto his [Jesus'] divinity.⁵² In other words, Jesus' divinity is sensed or deduced from his operations, that is his functions, in the world. Thus for Pobee, the emphasis of Jesus' divinity is on God's relation to man rather than on any metaphysical status as confessed by the Nicene – Chalcedonian Creed.

b) Ontological Christology

Ontological Christology affirms that Jesus is "of one essence with the father". According to Pobee, the process of philosophical abstraction from the concrete biblical texts which has been the chief trend of Western theology is not effective in Africa, at least if theology is to engage the church as a whole and not just the initiates. Pobee notes that in any discussion of Christology, one sooner or later has to make some reference to the

⁵¹ Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 92

⁵² Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 95

Nicene/Chalcedon definition as the reference point of orthodox Christianity.⁵³

However, for Pobee, the definition was an attempt of a predominantly Hellenistic society to articulate its belief in Jesus in terms of the language and concepts of that time. Thus, as he views it, some of the terms and concepts of the formula are alien to our current and modern language and thought-forms – whether in Europe or Africa, America or Asia.

He particularly questions the contemporary relevance of the key terms in the Chalcedon definition such as substance, person and hypostasis in their technical Chalcedonian sense.⁵⁴ For Pobee, Chalcedonian Christology is at best based on one of the Christological assumptions in one of the New Testament. He contends that the Creed was an attempt to “translate” the biblical faith into the then contemporary language and thought-forms.

However, the worldview and language assumed at Chalcedon do not allow the definition to become serviceable within any modern context. For Pobee, this makes it necessary to get behind the formula towards the biblical faith. Thus the Christological point of reference is the biblical texts and not the Chalcedonian definition.

Pobee contends that the Nicene- Chalcedonian confession of Christ represents one of the many Christologies in the New Testament. He contends that the New Testament, unlike

⁵³ Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 82

⁵⁴ Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 82-83

the Nicene -Chalcedonian Creed, does not speculate about the metaphysical relationships within the Godhead. Thus, as Pobee sees it, there are differences between New Testament and Chalcedonian Christologies.⁵⁵

Having taken such a stance, Pobee has obviously undermined the legitimacy of Nicene/Chalcedonian Christianity as reference point for Christological discourse. Pobee contends that our intellectual indebtedness to Greco-Roman culture has predisposed us to keep on discussing Christology in metaphysical terms. He argues that the biblical approach is different. With reference to the Trinity, Pobee contends that the ontological relations within the Godhead are absent in the biblical faith [piety].⁵⁶

For him, this amounts to mere metaphysical speculations about Christ. Such an assertion inevitably undermines the importance of the concepts of the triune God and the hypostatic union of the person of Christ which the Council of Chalcedon promulgated.⁵⁷

As Pobee views it, Christology in the context of the “biblical faith” was present in hugely functional terms of Jesus concerning his actions. Having taken the approach of degree Christology, Pobee has truncated the Chalcedonian definition of the person of Christ in terms of Christ confessed as truly God as well as truly human.

From this discussion, it is already evident that Pobee has rejected a Nicene/Chalcedon

⁵⁵ Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 83

⁵⁶ Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 82

⁵⁷ Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 82-83

Christology, particularly, insofar as it is proposed as reference point. He would probably also object to any other Christological proposal that employs a Chalcedonian definition of the person of Christ as a point of departure. This goes a long way to say that, any Christological proposal which uses the Chalcedonian Creed as a point of departure, would tend to forfeit its authenticity – whether in Africa or elsewhere in the Christian world.⁵⁸

5.3 New Testament Christology and Chalcedonian confession of Christ

Pobee contends that the Nicene- Chalcedonian confession of Christ represents one of the many Christologies in the New Testament. He contends that the New Testament, unlike the Nicene -Chalcedonian Creed, does not speculate about the metaphysical relationships within the Godhead. Thus, as Pobee sees it, there are differences between New Testament and Chalcedonian Christologies. With such a challenge, the question that one may pose here is: What is the role of the Nicean-Chalcedonian creed in Christian faith?

Paul calls us to believe with one's heart and to confess what one believes (Roman 10:9). This is a twofold Christian imperative – the credal and confessional imperative. This is root of creeds and confession of faith. Faith, therefore, involves belief, and to believe means that one is intellectually committed to truth God has revealed.

⁵⁸ Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 83

The faith which one believes is objective content of truth that has been described and developed in the creeds and confessions of the church, dogmas, doctrinal definitions and canons. In modern Christianity, the normatively creeds and confession as well as doctrinal definitions and canons, are expressive of authoritative dogma. If there are no true dogmas, then there are no false ones either; there are just differences of opinion and no one is wrong.

This will result to doctrinal relativisms. Relativism divides the enduring validity of the true judgments of creedal and confessional affirmations – if true, always true and permanently and universally true.

An example of an African theologian who has protested against Chalcedonian Confession is John Pobee. For him Confessions carry no authority in and from themselves. In his description of the Chalcedonian convictions regarding confessions he argues that the confession authority is derivative, being authority of God's word.

It is true that Nicene - Chalcedonian creed is historical and contextual by nature. But Pobee's assertion sets up an opposition between historical conditioning and permanent truth. The Confessions are products of fallible human activity, which implies that they may need corrections, revision, and even replacement.

Now, since Pobee holds that the creeds and confessions do not contain "timeless and a contextual systems of propositional truth, we may conclude that he espouses the view that

linguistically articulated dogmas, and the understanding of truth expressed by these propositions, are always in principle reversible and capable of being otherwise. Pobee's apparent rejection of the Chalcedonian confession is troublesome because it will leave us unable to explain the material identity of Christian truth over time.⁵⁹

Concerning the relationship between truth and creed (or dogma) Pobee rightly notes, that the truth of central affirmations of those confessional affected many way by the context in which they were asserted. Of course, since Creeds and confessions are historical documents written in light of a specific controversy, they are polemical and antithetical, and hence as such all truth formulated for polemical reasons is partial – about true.

However, Pobee has not said that historical conditioning and permanent truth are not incompatible. For Pobee, it would seem not since he denies, on the other hand, that there are “infallible doctrines”, final interpretation of the Bible that is, permanently true judgments expressing the central creedal affirmations of the Christian faith that are determinative, unquestionable, and infallible.

Pobee rightly sees the need for new expressions when it is necessary to confess this same faith if possible clearer than before. But Pobee's rejection of propositional truth leaves unclear how he would explain the material identity of Christian truth over time. That leaves unanswered the question of the nature of the continuity of the same faith – the

⁵⁹ Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*,96

same meaning, which must be protected from age to age. Hence his position leaves the creeds, confessions, dogmas of faith, indeed, Christian orthodoxy defenseless against relativism.

This is a troubling implication of Pobee's view because, as Pelikan rightly sees, underlying the creedal and conciliar definitions of orthodoxy from the beginning have been three shared presuppositions:

First, that there is a straight line from the Gospels to the creed. Second, that the true doctrine being confessed by the councils and creeds of the church is identical with what the New Testament calls the "faith which was once or all delivered to the saints, third, that continuity with that faith is essence of orthodoxy, and discontinuity with it the essence of heresy. (Pelikan, Credo). Although Pelikan does not develop the points he rightly makes here with respect to question of the nature of continuity that binds together the revealed word of God to the doctrines asserted by the creeds and confessions and hence to the essence of orthodoxy, that question has to be faced.⁶⁰

5.4 Conclusion

For Pobee the humanity and divinity of Jesus is one aspect of New Testament Christology which the attempt to construct a Christology in an African theology cannot

⁶⁰Jaroslav Pelikan, & Valerie Hotchkiss, *Creed and Confession of Faith in the Christian Tradition volume 1: Early, Eastern and Medieval*. New Haven: Yale University Press, (eds) 2003

skip. However, Pobee cautions that expounding the divinity of Jesus is a far more difficult task than outlining Jesus' humanity. Remarkably, functional Christologies hardly escape the "heresy" of degree Christology. The proponents of degree Christology usually define certain characteristics to be human qualities and then argue that the significance of Jesus consists in his possessing a large, even unique degree of these qualities. Clearly the divinity of Jesus is expressed in his activity, his total devotion to the will of God, thereby keeping intact and to the fullest the *Imago Dei*.

CHAPTER 6

Findings, Conclusion and Recommendation

6.1. Introduction

This chapter seeks to expatiate on the major findings which have emanated from this study and to state their theological implications for Christian leaders, theology students and the Christian body at large.

6.2 Research Findings

Firstly, Chalcedon Creed serves as official reference point for many denominations and para-church organization but individual theologians, particularly those in academia have protested against some aspects of the creed.

Such reactions come from both Catholic and Protestant perspectives. Some major publications from Roman Catholic theologians who have abandoned Chalcedon are those by Schoonenberg, Schillebeeckx, and Küng. Some major publications from Protestant theologians who also abandoned Chalcedon include those by Flesseman and Robinson. Amongst the contemporary theologians, Pannenberg has also registered his protest against Chalcedon. For him Chalcedon is unavoidably dualistic. Dunn and Bauer have also expressed dissatisfaction about applying Chalcedon as point of reference for Christological assessment.⁶¹

⁶¹ Pobe, *Toward an African Theology*, 97

Secondly, Protest against Chalcedon Creed is not common among African theologians. Those who do, for some personal reasons, refuse to accept that they protest against Chalcedon. Pobee has noted that his colleague J. Christopher Thomas had already expressed his dissatisfaction about his opposition between the Creed and the New Testament. However, he explains that this is not exactly the case. Instead, he is of the view that “both the New Testament and the Creed agree on the essentials of Christology, namely humanity and Divinity of Jesus Christ. The key question here is: What does Pobee mean, at least in his publications, Jesus is God? However, if one reads Pobee’s book *Towards an African Theology*, one may still agree with Pobee’s colleague J. Christopher Thomas in this regard.⁶²

Thirdly, Pobee’s view of the person of Christ differs from Chalcedon on the grounds that he explains the divinity of Jesus as functional divinity – Jesus was full embodiment of God but not God in the sense of God the Father. Chalcedon definition of the person of Christ is ontological divinity – God in the sense of co-equal and co-eternal with God the Father.

6.3 Theological and Evangelistic implications

Here my reaction and intention is not to defend the Nicene/Chalcedon notions per se, but instead to explain the necessity and the relevance of a re-appropriation of the Councils of

⁶² Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* 1979:165

Nicea and Chalcedon's confession into 21st century African and ecumenical Christianity. In this manner one may also explicate the essence and relevance of the ecumenical councils with regard to contemporary Christianity. The crux of the matter is that, if the Council of Chalcedon's creed is not relevant for contemporary ecumenical Christianity, its authenticity for African Christians would also be questionable.

Pobee has noted rightly that the New Testament presents several Christological assumptions and that the Chalcedonian view just happened to have become the dominant one. In this regard a question needs to be raised: If one, from the Bible, can view different Christological assumptions to construct Christology, and the Chalcedon definition "faithfully" represents one such assumption, what then, is the concern?

African, particularly the Ghanaian Christianity, is largely pro-Chalcedon inclined? Obviously, the church in African would gain much by standing with Nicene/Chalcedon which is duly represented in the tradition of mainline Christianity rather than an individual Christian Christological proposal which is in conflict with the ecumenical councils.

Interestingly, whether or not Pobee's degree (functional) Christology faithfully represents the totality of the person of Christ, as being portrayed in the Scripture, is another issue worth considering; but this would go beyond the scope of this thesis.⁶³

⁶³ Pobee *Toward an African Theology*, 82

The importance of ecumenical councils lies with the Church Fathers' efforts to protect the essentials of the Christian theology from degenerating into relativism whereby each Christian holds a belief as he or she understands it. This would have been the case if an individual Christian would have to select any of the several so called New Testament Christological assumptions to fit their situations. This is not to say that individual Christians are not at liberty to exegete the content of biblical passages and arrive at what they each deem to be the right meaning of the text. The aim of the ecumenical councils was to guide Christians with regard to the essentials of Christian doctrines. Without any form of theological unity, theological discourse could degenerate into confusion and this will greatly affect the church evangelistic activities.

6.4 Conclusion and Recommendation

The church in West Africa has subsequently remained largely pro-Nicene/Chalcedonian. For this very reason, would it not be more appropriate, if one wants to engage in helpful theological reflection, to set the Nicene/Chalcedon confessional definition of the person of Christ as the appropriate point of reference for a contextualised Christology? Chalcedon confession of Christ as "truly God" is crucial for Christianity, without that worshipping of Jesus becomes idolatry. Only when the African church anchors its faith within the tradition of the church that the church can assess proposals which do not cohere well with the doctrines of the ecumenical church

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