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Did you Preach Jesus Christ: The Christological Focus in the Writings of Joshua Russell Chandran

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Introduction

"Did you preach Jesus Christ?" an untiringly repeated question in the sermon criticism class, week after week to every preacher is a pointer to Dr. Chandran's thinking. The task of the theologian, the preacher, every¹ Christian is the proclamation of Jesus Christ, is the focus of Chandran's writings.

Joshua Russell Chandran, one of the most forceful Indian Christian theologians of independent India is deeply concerned about the proclamation of the gospel of Christ. His, commitment to Christ, persuasion to get across his concerns and the emphatic voice helped him to emerge as the leading spokesman of the 'Young Indian Church'.

A close perusal of Chandran's writings reveals that the one theme that runs through all his writings is the affirmation of Christ as the Lord and as the one who broke all barriers of separation and inaugurated a new humanity.

It is true that Chandran did not write any systematic volume on theology nor did he write many footnoted research articles. Yet he kept his voice heard through out the last five decades, a voice consistent and systematic. As D.W. Jesudoss rightly observes, in the emerging Indian Church he is the first to show a systematic and coherent view in theology.

I have examined almost all of Chandran's writings, both published and unpublished, which includes his major articles,

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comments, editorials, introductions, book reviews, reports, letters to the alumni and so on.

In this article an attempt is made to pick up some of his major concerns. They are discussed here under two broad classification, the theological concerns and ecclesiological concerns. Though such distinctions are not always perfect it is done for the better explication of them. But, the main task here is to bring to light the Christological focus in his writings.

Major influences

Chandran's sensitivity to socio-political issues is evident even from his college days. His association with youth organisations which are involved in social development programmes and his fascination for nationalism during the independence struggles contributed a lot in formulating his theological thinking. His association with the western missionaries, studies on Patristic and modern theology particularly under Paul Tillich, his readings on the ethical questions raised by Niebuhr brothers and Bonhoeffer provided opportunities to come into grips with, the theological concerns of the Indian Church and created in him interest to world Christian Communities and to the ecumenical movement and its concerns and strengthened his understanding of Jesus and concern for society.

Later his own association with W.C.C. and involvement in other ecumenical programmes like, Faith and Order commission, Christian Peace Conference, Ecumenical Association for Third World Theologians also shaped his thinking to a considerable extent.

The openness brought about by Vatican II, the experience he gained as convener of the C.S.I. Synod Theological Commission, the C.S.I. Lutheran Joint Theological and Inter-Church Commissions, and the CSI, C.N.I., M.T.C. Joint council contributed to the formation of his theological position.

Understanding of Christ

Chandran was critical of using abstract conceptual categories in expounding Christology. He thinks that they do not reflect concrete life issues, such expressions are meaningless and

irrelevant. He holds that what is more important is not the proclamation of 'Jesus as Lord' as a doctrinal formulation rather the practical implications of it in the real life situation. The basic fact for a Christian is the reality of Christ whom he confesses as the risen Lord².

However, though he is critical of the use of such formulations and classical conceptual categories one can observe the Apostolic witness to Christ expressed through the Christological titles being spread out in his writings. Expressions like, "the incarnate word", "the Logos", the "Son of God", "the New Man" "The Risen Lord", "the Mediator", the Redeemer", "the Reconciler" "the servant" "the one who has solidarity with the poor", and "the one who breaks all barriers of separation" are very much common in his writings. These expressions fall under the two classifications traditionally understood as "person of Christ" and "work of Christ". Though it may be difficult to explain all these terms in this brief article, a few of them which are crucial to him and important to understand him are discussed here.

The Lordship of Christ

Chandran repeatedly reminds that the primary task of the church is to proclaim the 'Lordship of Christ'. He observes that this confession is made by the early church and is repeated through out the centuries. Right from John the evangelist who confessed Jesus as 'my Lord and my God' the church upholds this confession. In the CSI Theological Commission report he points out "in any case the convert has to accept the Lordship of Christ publicly³. In connection with the Christians involvement in dialogue, he writes that

The Lord who became man for our sake also calls us in our witness to train to learn to stand where a Hindu or a Muslim or Buddhist or secular humanist stands and see how he can be led to believe in Christ and confess him as Lord.⁴

Unfortunately Chandran does not discuss in detail what he really means by the Lordship of Christ. However, he uses the term in a wider and more inclusive sense. He seems to be agreeing with Cullmann that

The Lordship of Christ must extend over every area of creation. If there were a single area excluded from his Lordship, that Lordship would not be complete and Christ would no longer be *Kurios* and this conviction must necessarily be a central part of faith in Christ as Lord⁵.

The New Man

Another term Chandran uses fairly frequently to refer to Jesus Christ is "the New Man". He writes, "Though the phrase 'New Man' is never used directly of Jesus Christ in the New Testament it is quite appropriate to call him so on the basis of the total evidence of the NT Jesus of Nazareth the crucified and risen is the New Man. It will be wrong to say that only after resurrection he became the New Man⁶.

Earlier P. Chenchiah spoke of Jesus as the 'New Man'. For him Christ represented a new stage in the evolution of a man and thus became 'The New Man' and with him a new creation is inaugurated⁷. For Chenchiah the conception of Christ as the 'new creation' which begins a new humanity is the result of a new mutation. But for Chandran his understanding of Christ as the new man falls within his understanding of Christ as Lord. Christ is the new man on two regards. One, Christ identified himself with the fallen community and sought to remove the barriers of all separation. And two, through his ministry Christ showed the potentialities available for human beings.

Other Christological Titles

Though Chandran mentions the traditional Christological titles like the incarnate word, Logos, son of God, son of Man, occasionally, he does not explicate any of these terms nor attempts to interpret them. He does not talk much about the God Christ relationship other than using the Christological titles and he believes that such discussions are unnecessary. However, he maintains that Jesus had a unique union with God.

Chandran's attempt to explain the nature of Christ seems to emphasise two things. On the one hand, the Christological

affirmations and confessions affirm the apostolic testimony. On the other, he demands that these testimonies should be relevant and meaningful to the context in which one testifies to the faith. Our main concern should be, he explains

how we may confess Jesus today in a manner which will both identify him as the Jesus of Apostolic testimony and will acknowledge him as the living Lord as challenging and relevant message of good news to people in their contemporary struggle for freedom....⁸

Therefore, in Chandran's writings on the one hand there are the confessions on Jesus as the word incarnate, son of God, Logos, the New Man and the Risen Lord and on the other, there are strong indications that how this Jesus is related to the world outside. And this takes us to Chandran's understanding of the work of Christ.

The work of Christ

Chandran is silent on the various atonement theories developed by the Church, nor does he propose any alternate theory. Yet through out his writings he is clear on what he wants to get across about the works of Christ.

Concepts like Christ as the mediator, redeemer, reconciler, servant and the one who has solidarity with the poor takes prominent place in Chandran's writings. But, for him the key to understand the work of Christ is the 'one who breaks all barriers of separation. For this he draws insights from the New Testament. He says "According to Paul the point of Christ's work was that by his death on the cross he has removed the wall of separation between the Jew and the gentile and made them both into a new people⁹. Elsewhere he writes that "in Christ many of the old barriers were broken down and the two main sections of humanity Jew and gentile in those days were brought together as one new humanity as we find in the epistle to Ephesians"¹⁰. He believes that in Jesus Christ the human community is united into a new humanity.

According to Chandran God unites his whole creation in Jesus Christ. He is well aware of the diversities of the world, the various barriers humans have created in the form of caste, religion, colour, economic status, political ideologies and so

on. But, he argues that, in Christ God has declared all such barriers of enmity as null and void.

This understanding of Christ as the one who breaks all barriers of separation is very different from the traditional understanding of the work of Christ. While Luther considers the work of Christ as a battle with the demonic forces¹¹ Ansaem considers it as the remission of punishment¹². Chandran doesn't seem to be convinced of these views. He is more critical of the popular notion that the work of Christ is an individualistic affair which prepares people for the other world. He writes

A Christian is never an individual. There is not individual salvation and individual experience of God. The prayer which our Lord taught his disciples is a corporate prayer using the word 'our Father, give us..., Forgive us..., Our sins as we forgive' Lead us....¹³.

Elsewhere he writes "...in the first place Christianity does not advocate "other worldly" view of life.¹⁴ According to him the work of Christ is always corporal and in community.

Because Chandran rejects the individualistic and other worldly understanding of the work of Christ, he says that the church in India needs to be liberated from the excessive influence of individualistic and other worldly interpretations of sin and salvation. It is in this context, Chandran's argument for a new humanity becomes very significant. The new humanity Jesus inaugurated is not a position given to an elected few because of Christ's saving act but one that has overcome all hostility and estrangement between man and God and man and man. So the new humanity is the result of Jesus' associating himself with the people and addressing the problems of the society.

Because of Chandran's commitment to Jesus as the one who breaks the wall of separation and unites everything in him to a new humanity, the traditional arguments used for the work of Jesus, a redeemer, reconciler, mediator etc., though are mentioned in his writings, doesn't find much space in his writing. When they are mentioned, they are mentioned in the wider understanding of Christ as the one who breaks all barriers of separation.

Chandran believes that the confession of Christ has two dimensions, that of universality and particularity. Confessing him as the risen Lord is the universal dimension. But this confession has to be made relevant to each context and that makes the understanding of Christ more dynamic. Therefore, he argues that Christ is not confined to certain doctrinal formulations but is a dynamic person who constantly challenges people for change.

Chandran does not expound a full-fledged Christology in the strict academic sense of the term. He depends heavily on the Biblical testimonies on Christ. When he writes to a non-Christian audience he states that "the Christian faith makes the fundamental affirmation of God on the basis of the Bible"¹⁵. Of course the Bible is not used in a literal sense though it has a predominant role in his doing theology.

It is interesting to note that though Chandran advocates strongly for indigenisation and is appreciative of Brahma Bandhav Upadhyaya's *Sat Chit ananda* and Chakkarai's *avatara* concept, he does not use any such terms in expounding his Christology. It is also significant that though he had his research thesis on Origin he is not interested to simply adopt the Christological formulations coined by the early Church. He believes that the usefulness of a Christology depends on the relevance of it in a particular situation. A Christology which is composed of Greek philosophical categories or one which deals with abstract formulations or for that matter even if they are of highly sanskritised Indian terms, will be of no relevance to the Indian context particularly in a country which is pluro-religious, multi-lingual and is divided on caste, economic, ethnic and various other ways. Only the Christ who breaks all barriers and unites the whole creation will find relevance in such a context. This understanding of Christ is reflected in all the other areas of Chandran's writings.

Church

Chandran was deeply concerned about the life of the Church. Unlike some other Indian Christian Theologians he kept a positive approach to the organised church. As a presbyter of the Church of South India and as chief spokesman of it for

more than three decades he projected a clear nature and function of the Church in India. He writes

the Church understands itself as the new creation of God in Christ and not simply an agent of society. It is a community brought into being as the Body of Christ sharing the ultimate concern of God and as the first fruit of the new humanity in Christ. It faithfully serves Christ and waits for the fulfilment of the new humanity and the summing up of all things in Christ.¹⁶

A careful analysis of the definition will show that according to Chandran the Church is the new creation of God in Christ. It is the first fruit of the new humanity in Christ. But, though it begins as the first it still waits for the summing up of everything in Christ. He comes to this conclusion on the basis of his knowledge of Christ given in the Biblical testimony is that Christ has come to inaugurate the new humanity and to sum up the whole creation in him. So, the ultimate goal is 'Shalom'. The new humanity which Jesus inaugurated is a community where perfect peace is enjoyed. The church is called to be the first fruit of this envisioned community.

Chandran is not really bothered about the traditional concepts like 'The Body of Christ', 'The New Israel', The people of God. He charges that these terms are used in a narrow sense by some theologians. Any description of the church as an exclusive and privileged community is rejected by Chandran. Since Jesus, through his death and resurrection declared that all people in the world belong together as one new humanity the church which is the first fruit is also a part of that new community. So, if at all there is any claim of exclusivism or separation to become involved in the world and to render service to the world and not to live as a privileged community.

Chandran is of the opinion that the primary task of the Church is proclamation of the Gospel "A church which is not committed to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ ceases to be the Church".¹⁷ This is a constant reminder to all his students and to church leaders. But that does not limit him to keep a narrow understanding of the Church. When he talks about the sacraments he reminds that the administering of the sacraments is not to make the Church a rigid community.

He writes "The Churches self understanding as the new Israel, the people of God, the body of Christ, etc., are meaningful only in the context of the recognition of the goal of God's saving action, in Christ as inclusive of all and not exclusive of a few."¹⁸

Chandran believes that the concern of the church is not for its members alone. It has a wider vision, a greater task. The calling of the church is for the whole humanity. As long as we affirm the Lordship of Christ we cannot take a narrow communistic understanding of the church.

Chandran's wider vision of the church is very much reflected in his writings on the meaning of baptism. As against Chanaiah and others who purported the idea of 'religionless Christianity' with no baptism, no confessions of faith and no creedal profession, Chandran argued for the necessity of baptism and other sacraments.

Chandran argues that the Christian baptism is closely linked with the baptism of Jesus himself. For Jesus, baptism was the key to his mission. Jesus accepted baptism because God required the 'sinless one' to identify with the sinful humanity. Therefore in baptism Jesus identified with sinful humanity, not allowing his sinlessness and righteousness to stand as a barrier between him and other men but entering into the identification as the key to the righteousness of God.¹⁹ By identifying with humanity and expressing solidarity, Jesus has broken down the wall of separation. By his baptism all discriminations are transcended.

Now, Chandran argues that our baptism is closely linked with Jesus' baptisms. The apostolic teaching is that 'we Are baptised into Christ, his baptism, death and resurrection. (Rom. 6:3-4, Gal. 3.26-29). Therefore our baptism is baptism into Jesus' baptism—participation in Jesus' life, death and resurrection. It is a commitment of identification with Jesus, in his mission to humanity. He reiterates that 'Baptism, rightly understood, therefore is the sacrament of inclusive identification with the humanity with which Jesus identified himself.'²⁰

Ministry

As a committed member of the Church, Chandran has great

concern for the ministry of the Church. For him ministry of the Church is the ministry of the risen Lord, and is to be carried on by the whole people of God. Yet he had greater concern for the ordained ministry. 'It is a ministry of set apart people and it is to be understood as a gift of the risen Lord to the Church in order that the whole people of Christ may fulfil their ministry. But, he does not concede that their setting apart is to enjoy certain privileges but, argues that it is to be with the people and to serve the people. He is much against the concept that the function of the ordained ministry is to perform a set of religious rituals. Chandran's emphasis for ordained ministry in no way minimises his concern for the ministry of the laity.

Theological Education

Proper theological training in India was one of his great dreams. The very first letter he wrote as the principal-designate indicates his passion for higher theological training. He writes on UTC, that 'this college exists only for the purpose of training men who will go out into the world with the message of Christ.²¹ His two concerns on theological education are, to make available the highest theological education possible in India itself, and to build up indigenous theological education which included development of both an indigenous theology and theological leadership. He believed that proper theological education is a necessary part of preparing candidates for ministry. But his vision for ministerial formation was not confined to the exegetical study, repeating of Christian doctrines and learning the traditional subjects. It included study of society, other religions and topics of contemporary importance. He argued that, the ministry is the ministry of the risen Lord who went beyond traditional and theological education should also go beyond the traditionally accepted formulations.

Church Union

Another area of Chandran's great interest and involvement was the Church Union movements. He has involved with the

various church union movements at the national and international levels. He very rightly calls the modern church union movements a new reformation in which the so called younger churches and eastern churches have a part. He believes that the key to the unity we seek is the reality of Christ whom we confess as the head of the body, the church. In other words, the churches calling to unity is unity in Jesus Christ. This is very clear when he says

It is important for the Churches to realise that faith in Christ and commitment to his work of redemption necessarily involves them in the mission of manifesting to the world of the new humanity redeemed by Christ. The Church union movement therefore is rooted in Christology.²²

He also adds that the Biblical testimony, the high priestly prayer of Jesus (John 17:21) and the Pauline writings in Eph. 3 invite his disciples to unite that the world may know.

Chandran does not consider church unity as an end in itself. It is only the first step for wider union, the union of the whole human kind. He believes that our affirmation of faith in the Lordship of Christ should lead us to participate in the wider union. He writes "If Jesus Christ is Lord of Church, then the Church must be able to show itself to the world as capable of being united in one fellowship. The goal of the Church under the Lordship of Christ is not just Churches unity but unity of the human community²³. This he emphasised very much in his later writings.

Mission

Chandran observes that it is one of our temptations to identify the mission of the Christ with the mission of the Church. He says that the mission is the mission of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. It is true that in the past mission was associated with churches and in some cases with colonialism and imperialism. He calls for a radical change in our approach to mission.

Any attempt to project mission as propagation of some set formulas and doctrines about Christ or as reproduction of the faith statements in the past era or in some other part of the

world or mere proselytism is looked upon with suspicion by Chandran. This does not mean that he was not interested in evangelism. In one of the earlier articles he wrote 'It is important that the Church in India gives serious thought to the evangelistic task in the next few decades.²⁴ In a statement on freedom of Religion Bill in 1978, he wrote 'whatever be the outcome of Freedom of Religion bill, the Christian calling for evangelism cannot be compromised.'²⁵

Chandran strongly believes that limiting mission to conversion from one religion to other, or uprooting a person from one's own culture is neither biblical nor desirable. The goal of mission is the call to believe in Jesus Christ and accept the Lordship of Christ. The mission is not only the proclamation of the good news but the living of it. Therefore, mission calls all his disciples for full participation with Christ in His ministry.

The Task of Theology

Another area of concern for Chandran is the task of Theology. It is true that he did not produce a systematic volume on theology. But, he did provide a clear perspective to do theology in India. He believes that theology is essentially a function of the church. The theologian is a servant of the church and is involved in the theological task only on behalf of the Church.²⁶ He defines theology 'as the systematic articulation of our faith, the faith in Christ which provides the inner dynamics for our life'²⁷. The pivotal point in this definition is his emphasis on faith in Christ which he considers as the core of theology.

He convincingly argues that theology has two dimensions, the universality and particularity or indigenuity, it is important that these two dimensions are held together. The universal dimension is the binding factor of the church and the creation as a whole. But the particular factor also has a vital role in doing theology. Each generation should be confronted by the gospel and make it meaningful. He forcefully argues that a relevant theology should address challenges that emerge out of our pluro-religious and socio-economic realities. There is no ready made theology which the church can apply. A meaningful

theology should emerge out of the active involvement in the situation.

Clothing of theology with philosophical categories (as is done by some theologians) have serious defects and misleading tendencies, he believes. The dominance of theology by metaphysics was not something he encouraged. He says that Christianity is a religion in which metaphysics is subordinate to the cause of the gospel which has more primacy to ethical issues.²⁸ Therefore, the key to do theology is the discernment of the reality of Christ and his mission and not the one of coining philosophical categories and doctrinal formulations.

Indigenisation

The emphasis on the 'particularly' of theology leads the discussion to the whole question of indigenisation. To Chandran indigenisation does not mean adopting a few indigenous terms or derobing and rerobering of a few theological concepts, nor compromising the gospel for the sake of religious harmony. It is nor even a technique for evangelism. He says that 'true Christian indigenisation will be aggressively Christo centric, and will witness to the summing up of all things in Christ²⁹. It is a necessary witness to the incarnation of the word of God.

He believes that genuine indigenisation should on the one hand hold together the absolute objectivity of the message and on the other proper interpretation of it. If it does not hold both together, it becomes a defective theology, either it remains indigenous, but not Christian theology or it may be Christian theology but irrelevant.³⁰

One of the possible dangers of indigenisation is the possibility of syncretism. Several of the Indian Christian theologians are being criticised of being syncretic. Chandran says that some amount of syncretism is inevitable for theology to be relevant. But one has to avoid, uncritical mixture of different religions as well as the convenient adoption of indigenous concepts.

Even though he vigorously encouraged indigenisation of theology, worship and other forms of Christian life, he was disappointed that it did not take sufficient root in the Indian soil.

Approach to other faiths

In the attempt for an indigenous expression of theology, one has to address the challenges posed by other religions as well. Chandran is second to none to recognise this reality. But one can see a change in his approach in the course of time. When he began his career, he wrote an article 'The Christian approach to non Christian religions'. Twenty years later when he wrote on the same theme he titled it as 'A Christian approach to other religions'. The change in titles itself is an indication of transformation that takes place in his thinking.

Chandran neither holds a narrow understanding of other religions as he calls it an attitude of untouchability to other religions, or a pluralistic approach which denies the uniqueness of Christ. He associates himself with a position which he calls the constructive approach. Chandran holds that we need to distinguish between general revelation and special revelation. General revelation is the implanting of God's character in nature where as the special revelation is revelation in Christ. And the constructive approach assumes that the Christian revelation is the standard by which other revelations are to be tested.³¹

Chandran is persistent in emphasising the uniqueness of Christ. He believes that in Christian faith, the truth is in the person and work of Christ and all other ideas of revelation and knowledge should be examined in the light of this faith in the self disclosure of God in this once-for-all saving act of Christ³². The revelation in Christ is more inclusive than any other revelation. He says that everything has to be redeemed and transformed by Christ in order to be made part of Christian religion. Christ stands over against the claims of all other religions. In the approach to other religions, Christ should be at focal point and not Christian religions. The centre should be Christ and not formulations about Christ.

Dialogue

The inclusiveness of Christ and the openness in our approach to other religions gives scope for dialogue. But Chandran cautions against two misconceptions on dialogue (1) It is not

one of the easiest ways of living in harmony with people of other faiths and ideologies. (2) It is not a subtle tool for evangelism. He is also not in favour of the 'complete openness' advocated by some theologians. Definitely there should be openness. But, openness that abandon the church's calling to make disciples of all nations and baptise them in the 'Triune name' is not advisable, suggests Chandran. Dialogue should be integrally rooted in Christian faith. One should enter into dialogue not with complete openness but with a firm commitment, a commitment to Christ. That does not mean that he denies the possibility of enriching ones own faith in the process of dialogue. We should still be willing to enrich our faith in the light of new knowledge and understanding. But, he says this should not be our ultimate aim. Our ultimate aim is the proclamation of the Lordship of Christ.

Socio-political and Economic Concerns

Chandran is equally if not more aware of the challenges posed by the socio-political and economic realities. He is much concerned about the Christian's participation in the socio political realms of our life. He calls it the socio political mission 'The Christian social mission is no more a bye-product, but is integral to faith in Christ'³³. He says that the biblical testimony in the Bible and specially the work of Christ in the New Testament provide guidelines for our political involvement in the socio political life of the nation. Therefore, he argues that our commitment to Christ demands not only participation but active involvement in the socio-political fabric of our society (national life). Moses' words to Pharaoh 'Let my people go in order to keep the pilgrims feast, and Jesus' own words 'render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's are indications that worship life and political involvement is closely linked with one another and each will be incomplete without the other.

Secularism

While strongly endorsing the need for Christian involvement in national life, Chandran also talks about secularism. He emphasises about two aspects of secularism. One, secular as

opposed to religions and the other, secularism as a policy by which to live meaningfully in a just society.

Chandran is also concerned about the rise of communalism in our country. He is against any form of communalism, communalism of the minority community or of the majority community. The inclusive nature of Christ calls the Christian to the service of the whole nation. Any communalistic approach, will be contrary to the work of Christ which breaks all walls of separation.

In addition to the talk about secularism and communalism, themes like, a just society, peace, human dignity were all dear to his heart. *Amirtham* rightly observes that 'it is difficult to find any of his sermons, talks or articles without some reference to these concerns'.³⁴

For Chandran, involvement in socio political concerns is an integral part of our ministry and mission. Those concerns were at the centre of Jesus' ministry. So, it should be ours too. It is Christ who compels us to actively address the challenges that come out of our socio political realities. One may not find explicit christological statements as such. But Chandran believes that our faith in Christ as the Lord and as the one who breaks all barriers of separation demands it.

Conclusion

As a Christian theologian of the independent India, Chandran's main concern seems to place Christ at the centre of theology. This is evident all through his writings. In whatever area he writes, he never departs from this conviction. His faith is deeply rooted in Christ the risen Lord and his affirmation of Christ as 'the New Man' is the basis for the interpretation of the work of Christ as the one who breaks all the barriers of separation.

He repeatedly emphasises the biblical foundation of theology. The key to the message of the Bible is the affirmation of God's revelation of the historic event of Jesus. He affirms that the Bible testifies to Christ that the whole of creation comes under the influence of Christ. Therefore, *Amirtham* is right when he observes that the vision Chandran has:

... a Christo-centric vision. It is centered around the new humanity which Christ has initiated as the New Adam (Eph. 2:15). It is rooted in Christ's life, and it will be realised when Christ becomes all in all (Col. 1:17-20)³⁵.

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