

The Divinity of Christ

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Who is Jesus? Is He divine? Such questions have exercised the minds of thoughtful inquirers for nigh unto two thousand years since Jesus of Nazareth completed his earthly ministry. His disciples, by their own admission, had wrestled with his identity during the years of their training. But after the ascension and Pentecost they never evidenced the slightest doubt as to the right answer. We Christians, as believers in and witnesses to Christ, must be firmly grounded in our understanding of and commitment to the deity of our Lord-not only that we might testify of Him to others, but also for His glory and our spiritual welfare.

An Important Matter

The question is neither merely speculative nor of historical interest alone, and it is far too important to be relegated to an intellectual trial in a philosophy of religion class, or to be glibly and irreverently scrutinized and dismissed by some second-rate academic pundit in the Religion 101 course at a university. It is a question with eternal consequences.

It is indisputable that Christ's immediate disciples saw this to be an issue of the utmost importance. Indeed, Christ had asked them directly: "Who do you say that I am?" (Mt 16:15) and had explicitly told them that the proper answer was a revelation of the eternal God, with foundational significance for His kingdom. Karl Barth, no conservative evangelical mind you, rightly said that what a person thinks about Christ determines what he ultimately thinks about everything else. Suffice it to say, from any perspective, this question is not only worth asking and studying, it is one that we had better answer carefully.

Mixed Signals from the Academy

The current cacophony of opinion with regard to Jesus' identity is enough to give anyone a headache. It is not hard to find competing views of Jesus in the scholarly community today, united only in their mutual rejection of his divinity. Sometimes we are told that Jesus was a fraud. Various academics assure us that Jesus was the first feminist, or gay-rights activist, or the progenitor of whatever Johnny-come-lately movement to which they wish to lend legitimacy. Meanwhile the instructor across the hall assures us, on the contrary, that Christ was the founder of a chauvinistic, anti-environmental and hopelessly patriarchal religious regime. Many generic religionists will admit that he was "a Divine-Man" in some way, but certainly not God (in the traditional Christian sense). Other scholars, more disinterested and objective perhaps, assure us that we will never arrive at a final knowledge of who Jesus was (or claimed to be) because he is a mystery shrouded in layers of tradition. In short, they tell us, we will never really know who Jesus was because the Church "invented" him, at least as we now know him.

What is more disturbing are the noises emanating from supposedly Christian scholars who are offering estimates of Christ that differ radically from historic Christian orthodoxy. Conservative pastors and campus workers are not unaccustomed to the quizzical looks they get from confused students reporting that a religion professor has announced to them that Jesus never claimed to be God. Seminary professors and Bible department lecturers sometimes paint Christ merely as a good man or a great moral teacher. More advanced practitioners of the historical disciplines tell us that Jesus was a social and religious revolutionary, "a marginal Jew." An older form of this same story-line suggested that he was an apocalyptic prophet. In fact, the only thing the modern "mainstream" academy seems to be sure of is that Jesus Christ, whatever else he was, was not divine.

It must be stressed, however, that this phenomenon of teachers within the bounds of the Church raising doubts about the divinity of Christ is an entirely recent development. One looks in vain in the history of the earliest Christianity for signs of theological disagreement on the deity of our Lord. While there were occasionally Jewish and pagan objections raised against Christ's divinity, not even heretics suggested such a possibility in Christendom for nigh unto three centuries! Indeed, so profound was the unanimity of the Church's recognition of and commitment to the deity of Christ, the major Christological belief that the Church struggled to accept was Christ's humanity. The docetic, gnostic, and Marcionite errors stumbled on Jesus' true humanity in the first centuries of the Church's life, but not until the fourth century (with the advent of Arianism) did a major heterodoxy arise denying Jesus' divinity. When it did, it was so completely rejected and rebutted through the course of the controversy that objection to the full deity of our Lord did not break surface in Christianity for some thirteen-hundred years.

Roots of a Current Heresy

What, then, accounts for this modern assault on the deity of Christ? Aside from the enterprise of the Evil One, the logical outworking of enlightenment rationalism, and the epistemic skepticism born of Kantian transcendentalism, we may suggest at least two reasons, two proximate causes, for the appearance of this anti-Christian teaching against the deity of Christ within the Church's pale. In the "quest for the historical Jesus"-an attempt to rediscover the nature and teaching of the Jesus of history which began in the eighteenth century and has continued in varying forms to this day-these two assumptions have exerted controlling influence.¹

First, it is presupposed by the devotees of the new Gospel criticism that the Church's teaching about Christ consolidated at the Council of Chalcedon (451) was an invention of theologians and philosophers, "a figment of pious imagination." The Christ of the original sources, they say, is a much more human, much more ambiguous Christ than the Christ of post-Nicene theology. Thus our new academic critics now propose to save us from this "hellenized" Christ, by stripping away the theological-philosophical layering of Nicea, Constantinople, and Chalcedon (and even the Apostle Paul!) and returning to the earliest, authentic sources.

Second, the biblical critics who have given us the "new Jesus" have assumed a very different set of primary sources for the study of the person and life of Christ than have traditionally been employed by Christians in coming to an understanding of who Christ is. The Gospels themselves, as they now stand, are no longer primary sources. Indeed, they are neither to be trusted nor merely harmonized. The critics tell us, we must "get behind" the Gospels if we are to discover the real Jesus. The Gospels, as products of the early believing community (rather than divine revelation) must be unraveled for clues as to the unadorned truth about Christ.

What Shall We Say Then?

These assumptions almost universally held in the wider community of Biblical scholars, have even made significant inroads into evangelical thought (with its anti-ecclesiastical, anti-historical, and anti-systematic tendencies). In effect, these two presuppositions simultaneously require the rejection of the Church's historic and official teaching concerning Christ, and the normative authority of Holy Scripture. Such a drastic investigative starting-point betrays the audacity, individualism, arrogance, and naiveté so often characteristic of the modern religious academy. At least four things must be said in response to this situation.

¹ The reader in search of a brief, understandable, scholarly, evangelical synopsis of competing opinions about the person of Christ should see Carl F. H. Henry's *The Identity of Jesus of Nazareth* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), especially chapter one: "Disparate Views of Jesus," pp. 9-22.

First, such an approach fails to understand what dogma is. Herein lies its arrogance. By operating on such a basis, the scholar implicitly rejects all three of the essential elements of dogma: the social, the traditional, and the authoritative.

(1) The Church's dogma is social in that it is received neither on the testimony of individual Christians nor even a single generation of Christians, but is recognized by the whole. Herein lies the element of truth in the Vincentian canon ("what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all"). Only in the communion of saints may we confidently understand and propagate the truth.

(2) Dogma is traditional in that it is based upon historical revelation completed over nineteen centuries ago and passed on in the Church from generation to generation under the guiding protection of the Holy Spirit. However impressive the results of the new critical literary disciplines, they have no right to bypass or undercut the time-honored deposit of truth bequeathed in the creeds and confessions of the Church.

(3) Dogma is authoritative in that it is the embodiment of divine truth revealed in the word of God. Dogma is not "perspectival." Orthodox dogma, as a faithful ecclesial formulation of central Christian truth from God, about God, and for his glory, transcends the individual opinions of theologians and church members, and even the cultures and ages in which the Church has received and formulated it. Modern subjectivism may not like such a claim, but it must accept it or bid farewell to Christianity.

Second, such an approach fails to appreciate the necessary connection between truth and belief. When one announces to the Church that "all your great historians and theologians have been wrong about the Christ, Jesus was a mere mortal, but not to worry, faith is the important thing, no need to get hung up on doctrines and history," and then wonders why Christians get upset, one evidences an astounding degree of obtuseness. Moderns may not think that what we believe is religiously significant or that it needs to be grounded in reality, but nobody else has ever believed such rubbish. As Donald MacLeod has put it: "You can tell people that 'the Gospels are not true' and they will believe you, but when you tell them 'the Gospels are not true, but I believe them' people are, rightly, incredulous."

Third, there is a double irony in the modern attempt to liberate the Church from the encrustation of Greek language, thought, and philosophy in its formulation of the doctrine of Christ. On the one hand, the cries that the early Church capitulated to secular patterns of terminology and thought in its Chalcedonian definition ring particularly hollow when they come from a generation of scholars who are philosophically committed to the most radical attempt at "contextualization" in the history of Christian doctrine, and who have in fact single-handedly attempted to jettison more historic Christian formulation than any generation of heretics who ever walked the planet. On the other hand, the whole project of decoding the Gospel sources for clues to the original Jesus carries with it, of necessity, the most astounding untested personal opinions.

Fourth, the manner in which modernist critics treat the Gospels' testimony to the claims of Christ is both unhistorical and unpastoral. I do not here object to their questioning of the truthfulness of these claims. Unbelievers do so all the time. Rather, what is so irksome is the unwillingness to allow the text to say what it seems to be saying, evidenced in the regular practice of identifying a reduced extent of "authentic" material in the Gospels, not on exegetical grounds but because of prior philosophical considerations (as in Funk's so-called "Jesus Bible"). It is unhistorical in that it approaches sources possessed of enormous historical corroboration and proceeds to subject them to a literary deconstruction unjustified by the text itself. In this way the critics are not unlike political spin-meisters who can take facts which say "black" and make them say "white or maybe gray." It is unpastoral in that it raises fundamental doubts about prime articles of revealed theology with no sense of the enormity of the consequent effects on the faith and life of the people of God, and no sense of accountability either to the Church or God himself.

The Teaching of Scripture

Our thinking in these matters needs desperately to be Scripturally informed. In the grand debate over the deity of Christ, typical evangelical quips about trusting in "a Person and not a proposition" indicate a confusion as to the nature and significance of the discussion, and are a woefully deficient response to current ecclesial challenges to "the faith once delivered." "It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are sincere" in addition to being insipid, is a profoundly mistaken sentiment, especially when the belief one is discussing is the centerpiece of redemption. We will hardly win the day in the marketplace of ideas with such an outlook. We are called as Christians to be witnesses to Christ, and that means first and foremost bearing testimony in our lives and words to the objective revelation of him in Scripture. That, of course, requires us to be knowledgeable of the Biblical testimony concerning the divinity of our Lord.

Four classic works are commended to readers who are interested in an extensive review of the Biblical witness to the person of Christ: H. P. Liddon's *The Divinity of Our Lord* (1867), B. B. Warfield's *The Lord of Glory* (1907), Geerhardus Vos' *The Self-Disclosure of Jesus* (1926), and Robert L. Reymond's *Jesus, Divine Messiah: The New Testament Witness* (1990). Though it is hardly possible to attempt a survey of the relevant Biblical testimony here, a brief outline of the main lines of Scriptural evidence will make sufficiently clear the claims of Christ and his contemporaries to his divinity.

Sometimes we are told that there is no verse in the New Testament that says "Jesus is God," with the implication that there is no straightforward claim to his divinity to be found in its pages. Such, however, is not the case. For instance, in the following passages the deity of Christ is either explicitly asserted or strongly implied. In Titus 2:13, Paul speaks of believers "looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus." Peter opens his second epistle greeting "those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours, by the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ" (2 Pet 1:1). Luke records Paul's words to the Ephesian elders in

Acts 20:28 where he reminds them that they are overseers of "the church of God which he purchased with His own blood." Such a statement makes no sense unless we accept the full force of the doctrine of the incarnation: Christ was God in the flesh, therefore we may speak of God shedding his own blood. John testifies to Jesus (whom he calls the Word) in the foreword to his Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (Jn 1:1). John goes on to say that Jesus, the Word, is "the only begotten from the Father" (Jn 1:14) and then utters the astounding claim that "no man has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him" (Jn 1:18). Thus John not only asserts Christ's deity, but also his sole ability to reveal the Father to the world. It is thus not surprising that Thomas confesses Jesus to be "My Lord and My God" in John 20:28. The author of Hebrews identifies Jesus, the Son as the person about whom the Psalmist (Ps 45:6) said: "Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever" (Heb 1:8). James, the brother of our Lord, identifies himself as Jesus' "bond-servant" (Jas 1:1) and refers to his brother as "the glory" in James 2:1, neither of which designations is typical of siblings or reverent Jewish believers, but both of which speak volumes about his perception of the divine nature of Christ. Such passages could be multiplied (e.g. Mt 1:23, Jn 17:3, Acts 2:17 & 33, Col 2:9, 2 Thes 1:12, I Tim 1:17, and I Jn 5:20), but the ones we have just reviewed establish the teaching of Jesus' divinity from Paul, Peter, Luke, John, Thomas, the author of Hebrews, and James-a representative selection of apostles and their understudies. All of these unambiguously and unanimously testify to the deity of our Lord.

Christ's divinity is set forth in Scripture in numerous other places and in a variety of other ways as well. First, the attributes of the one, true God of Israel are ascribed freely and without apology to Jesus by the writers of the New Testament. No first-century Jew could have done so without fully understanding the radical theological significance of such an ascription. The author of Hebrews applies Psalm 102:25-26, which asserts the eternity of God, to Christ in Hebrews 1:11-12 ("you are the same, and your years will not come to an end"), and as we have already seen John declares the Word's eternity in the prologue to his Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word." Our Lord's immutability is asserted in Hebrews 13:8 where we are told that Jesus Christ is "the same yesterday, and today, and forever." Jesus himself claims the attribute of omnipresence in the Great Commission of Matthew 28:20. "I am with you always," he says. This is only possible if he is possessed of what theologians call "immensity"-an attribute of the God of Israel alone. Jesus' omniscience is regularly stressed in the Gospel records, as for instance John's astounding declarations that Jesus "knew all men" and "knew what was in man" (Jn 2:24-25) or Luke's almost incidental comment that Jesus knew what the Pharisees were thinking (Lk 6:8). The New Testament also indicates that Christ possesses the divine attribute of sovereignty. Jesus himself claims unlimited divine authority when he announces "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth" (Mt 28:18) and Paul reiterates the point when he says: "in [Christ] all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form...and he is the head over all rule and authority" (Col 2:9-10). To claim that a person is eternal, immutable, omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent, is to claim that person to be divine-which is precisely what the New Testament does of Christ.

A second way in which the Scriptures testify to Christ's deity is that the great Old Testament names of God are applied to him. Over and over the divine names of Israel's God are taken up by Christ or employed by his disciples in reference to him. For instance, the great Old Testament covenantal name of God, Yahweh, or Jehovah, which is translated Lord (kurios) in the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament) nigh unto seven thousand times is applied in its fullest sense to Christ on numerous occasions. Paul indicates that the fundamental confession of a Christian is "Jesus is Lord" (Rom 10:9). He considers such a profession necessary for salvation, and evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit in a person's life (1 Cor 12:3). Furthermore, he indicates that there will come a day when the whole world will confess that "Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil 2:11). This declaration of Christ's divine lordship is perhaps the earliest confession of the Church, and in the light of the Old Testament significance of the term and the early Christian's steadfast defense of Christ's unique lordship, it is apparent that "Lord" is far more than a polite title of address or mere acknowledgment that he is our master. We may add that New Testament writers routinely apply Old Testament "Lord" passages to Jesus (e.g., Jn 12:41 says that Isaiah's vision was of Christ on the throne in Is 6:10, see also Rom 8:34, Acts 2:34, and 1 Pet 3:22). We may mention in passing that Jesus refers to himself with the exalted "I AM" formula repeatedly in the Gospel of John (Jn 8:58, cf., 6:35, 8:12, 24, 11:25, 14:6, and 18:5-8), and calls himself "the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" in Revelation 22:13. All these divine names, constitute an argument of significant force indicative of the New Testament's view of the deity of our Lord.

Third, the Scriptural writers announce that Christ does divine works, activities that are ascribed to God alone in the Old Testament. At least four examples come to mind.

(1) John, Paul, and Hebrews speak of Christ as the agent of creation and the providential upholder of all things (Jn 1:1-3, Col 1:15-17, and Heb 1:1, 3, 10). That God alone is the author and upholder of creation is, of course, a fundamental axiom of Hebrew theology.

(2) The Gospels indicate that Jesus performed miracles and saving acts by virtue of his own innate power. Though the prophets and apostles, too, did signs and wonders, they did so with derivative power. "The Son gives life to whom he wishes" (Jn 5:21) is not the statement of a mere disciple or holy man. "I myself will raise [them] up on the last day" (Jn 6:40) is not the word of even the most exalted prophet of Israel. "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (Jn 2:19) is a challenge which admits of no parallel amongst even the greatest of the servants of God. Jesus' disciples clearly understood this difference, as Peter explains in Acts 4:7-10. Christ's power was not only of a different order than theirs, but also intrinsic and underived.

(3) The Gospels depict Christ as unilaterally forgiving sin. For instance, to the scribes of Capernaum, Jesus says: "in order that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...I say to you [the paralytic], rise, take up your pallet and go home" (Mk 2:10-11). Elsewhere, he asserts his right to that authority by delegating a

form of it to his disciples (Mt 116:19, 18:18, and Jn 20:23). Who but the Almighty may forgive sins or delegate such authority?

(4) The New Testament ascribes the right of final judgment of men and angels to Christ. In the Old Testament this is the right of God alone. As Paul says, "we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ" (2 Cor 5:10) and according to Jesus himself, the Father "has given all judgment to the Son" (Jn 5:22). True, that saints will judge with him, but in virtue of their relation to him and not by inherent right. All these divine activities attributed to Christ from yet another line of witness to his deity.

Fourth, the worship of God was freely offered to Christ by his disciples, all of whom were Jews and who knew that to worship one other than God constituted idolatry and blasphemy. When we recognize "that the great object of Scripture is to reclaim the world from idolatry" this fact appears all the more remarkable and suggestive. The New Testament is peppered with doxologies to him (e.g., Rom 9:5, 2 Tim 4:18, and 2 Pet 3:18). Prayers are offered to him (e.g., Acts 7:59-60, 9:13-14, and Rev 22:20). When the disciples met their resurrected Lord, instinctively, "they worshipped him" (Mt 28:17). John declares him to be worthy "to receive...honor and glory and praise" (Rev 5:12).

The force of such testimony constitutes yet more incontrovertible evidence of the New Testament view of the deity of Christ. Other lines of argument could be marshaled: the unique role of Christ in salvation, his preexistence, the virgin birth, the resurrection, the Old Testament teaching of the divine Messiah, the testimony of John the Baptist, the various self-designations (or titles) of Christ, the testimony of his enemies, and the Trinitarian formulas of the New Testament. However, our brief review is sufficient to indicate the weight of evidence for the divinity of Christ in the Gospels and Epistles. Robert L. Dabney once astutely observed: "If the Apostles did not intend to teach this doctrine they have certainly had the remarkable ill-luck of producing the very impression which they should have avoided, especially in a book intended to subvert idolatry."

Now the Scriptural testimony may not convince some people of the claims of Christ, to be sure. But it is ridiculous to even suppose that Christ's divinity is not the claim or view of the Scriptures. The ante-Nicene Fathers bear clear witness to this essential rule of faith. Clement of Alexandria was representative of their high view of Christ when he said, in the early third century, "Believe, O man, in him who is man and God: believe in him who suffered and is worshipped as the living God; servants, believe in him who was dead; all men believe in him who is the only God of all men: believe and receive salvation."

The Significance of Christ's Deity

The Westminster Larger Catechism asks in Question 38: "Why was it requisite that the Mediator should be God?" It wisely and biblically answers:

It was requisite that the Mediator should be God, that he might sustain and keep the human nature from sinking under the infinite wrath of God, and the power of death; give worth and efficacy to his sufferings, obedience and intercession; and so satisfy God's justice, procure his favour, purchase a peculiar people, give his spirit to them; conquer all their enemies, and bring them to everlasting salvation.

Herein we may detect at least eight theological reasons for the indispensability of the deity of our Lord.

(1) Christ's divinity was necessary to bear the force of the atonement. The weight of the wrath of God, for the sins of the world, is so great that no mere mortal could have borne it. It was Christ's lot to drink that cup to its bitter dregs. Only a divine Savior could have survived it.

(2) Christ's divinity was necessary to imbue his mediatorial labors with limitless value. An almost infinite satisfaction was due God in view of the sins of humanity. No finite being could pay such a price and thus answer the full requirements of strict covenantal justice.

(3) Christ's divinity was necessary to quit God's punitive wrath. The covenant of works required perfect and personal obedience, upon penalty of death. The consequent defection of Adam and Eve from their covenantal obligation plunged the whole race into an age-long rebellion against God. Only the Father's costly sacrifice of his beloved only begotten Son was adequate to fulfill the just sentence due us all from the Almighty.

(4) Christ's divinity was necessary to secure the Father's favor. Not because God had to be forced or coaxed to love his people. Not at all. Indeed, the atonement did not "make" God love us, but rather is the expression of his love and indispensable condition of his covenantal favor towards us. Nevertheless, once God set his love on us to redeem us, and infinite penalty and positive righteousness was required to secure his eternal benediction. Such an accomplishment required the divine Savior.

(5) Christ's divinity was necessary to redeem a people for himself. The divine Christ literally purchased his people. Christ earned our salvation. We are saved by works: his works! Only a divine savior could have paid the costly purchase price for redeeming us from our bondage to sin and death.

(6) Christ's divinity was necessary for the pouring out of the Spirit on his people. It was essential that our salvation be both accomplished and applied. Christ told his disciples that it was necessary that he ascend to the right hand of the Father in order to send the Holy Spirit (Jn 16:7). Only the eternal God-man holds the right to send the Spirit where he will, that his salvation might be applied to all his people.

(7) Christ's divinity was necessary for the conquest of all his people's enemies. Our Lord, the Captain of our Salvation, not only made satisfaction for the condemning power

of sin, but also decisively destroyed the might of Satan, the world, and death. This destructive work of redemption required the infinite capacities of the divine Captain of the Hosts of the Lord.

(8) Christ's divinity was necessary to accomplish our everlasting salvation. Our eternal blessedness essentially consists in the enjoyment of our Savior. He is not only the author of our redemption, he is the matter of it. He is not merely the means of our salvation, he is the goal of it. In glory we are not only made happy by him, but in him. Only a divine savior could serve as the great fountain of blessedness for all redeemed humanity.

Conclusion

As Dabney reminded us last century, this is a first order issue: "a prime article of revealed theology; affecting not only the subsistence of the Godhead, but the question whether Christ is to be trusted, obeyed, and worshipped as God, the nature and efficacy of His atoning offices, the constitution of the Church, and all its rites. He who believes in the divinity of Jesus Christ is a Christian; he who does not, (whatever his profession), is a mere Deist." The force of Dabney's logic is irresistible. "Who is Christ?" is a question we cannot dodge. We cannot distance ourselves from it. No one can. We cannot muse upon it in a state of detached ambivalence, because we are inescapably involved in its answer. We cannot be neutral about it, because Christ will not let us. We may either answer "God incarnate" and bow our knees, or we must answer something-anything-else and reject him. There are no other options. C. S. Lewis, in his classic address "What Are We To Make of Jesus Christ?," offers perspective on the personal gravity of the question. We shall leave the final word with him: "What are we to make of Christ?' There is no question of what we can make of Him, it is entirely a question of what he intends to make of us. You must accept or reject the story."

Further References:

For excellent Reformed surveys of "the quest," see Robert B. Strimple, *The Modern Search for the Real Jesus* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995), Klaas Runia, *The Present-day Christological Debate* (Leicester: IVP, 1984), pp. 1-17.

David Wells in *The Person of Christ*, pp. 9-10.

Louis Berkhof, *Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), pp. 31-34.

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