

Jesus Christ – His Person

The deity of Christ

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THE DEITY OF CHRIST

1. Introduction

Aims

The deity (godship, divine nature) of Jesus Christ is at the heart of the Christian faith. The true disciple follows Him, not for what He does, but because of who He is. The disciple will say that Jesus Christ is not a mere man, but God. But, ... is this true? Is the carpenter of Nazareth the Son of God whom he claimed to be?

Because Christianity is essentially Christ, any serious enquiry into Christianity should begin with the person of Christ. His person and work are the rock upon which the Christian religion is built. Stott (1971, 3) shows that if Jesus is not who He said He is, the foundation of Christianity is undermined. On the other hand, Stott argues, if Jesus Christ can be shown to have been a uniquely divine person, many other problems begin naturally to be solved:

- The existence of God is proved;
- the character of God is revealed; and
- questions about man's duty and destiny, life after death, the purpose and authority of the Old Testament, and the meaning of the cross begin to be answered.

The aim of this study, then, is to examine the theological problem of the deity of Christ in view of the erosion of the Christian faith that is taking place in many ways towards the turn of the year 2000 (Wilson, 1-7 Dec. 2000: 32-33).

Although this article will not focus on the humanity of Christ, it will of necessity include references to his humanity. The Scriptures declare Him to be fully God and fully man simultaneously. Therefore one should always keep both these natures in mind, so as not to fall into the trap of minimising his humanity in order to 'protect' the fullness of his deity (Dulle: 1).

Erosion of Christ's deity outside the church

It should be no surprise to note the attempts from outside the church, to erode the deity of Christ. Those in other faiths, as well as those who are professing atheists partake in such attempts on a regular basis. The believer will no doubt say that this is to be expected.

On the forefront is an organisation called *THE JESUS SEMINAR*. They claim to represent some of the world's finest scholars on the topic and reality of Jesus Christ. Some of these are academic theologians, some profess to be believers; some declare outright that they do not believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and that they regard their involvement in the "great search for the true Jesus" simply as an academic exercise. Decisions on what is truth and what not, are even made within the organisation through a process of voting.

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Erosion of Christ's deity outside the church (continued)

Among their “scientific findings” are denials of the virgin birth and Christ’s empty grave. They also conclude that Christ’s body never arose from the grave. Among their explanations one finds that the body may have been left on the cross for the vultures, or that it was buried somewhere in a shallow grave. The disciples would have had some kind of “resurrection experience”. According to some, the advantage of presenting the “facts” in this way, enables them to “believe” (Jackson, 13 October 2000:15)

Robert Price, a professor in New Testament Philosophy at Drew University and member of the Jesus Seminar, is more explicit in his denial of Christ (1997):

“I used to think, when I myself was a Christian apologist, a defender of the evangelical faith, that I had done a pretty respectable job of vindicating that story as history. I brought to bear a variety of arguments I now recognize to be fallacious, such as the supposed closeness of the gospels to the events they record, their ostensibly use of eyewitness testimony, etc. Now, in retrospect, I judge that my efforts were about as effective in the end as Superboy’s! When all is said and done, he remains a fiction.”

Of course, people like Price cannot simply be dismissed by a wave of the hand. The fact that he used to be an energetic young evangelist certainly draws the attention. It immediately calls to mind the words of God through his prophet Hosea, that his people are destroyed from lack of knowledge (Hosea 4:6). These words speak very clearly to church of Jesus Christ today!

Erosion of Christ's deity inside the church

Unfortunately the erosion of Christ’s deity, and in fact the inerrancy and truth of Scripture, as well as the statements of Jesus Christ, are being systematically and deliberately eroded from within the Christian church. It seems to be spearheaded by academic theologians and educated people who claim status as “thinking” believers, for example:

- Christ is not the only Way to the Father. There is only one God and people can come to Him by many ways (Waldner, 27 August 2000).
- I have taken God apart, looked at him from all sides and put him together again; and then I did it all over again, and found nothing to fear. God just “roles his eyes” when I stumble and helps me up (Ferreira, 2000:15).

These “thinking” believers are perceived to describe Jesus, not as the Son of God announcing any form of judgement, but as a friendly, liberal philosopher – a Jesus with a message of no discrimination, but of political correctness (Wessels, 1999). Such an approach, of course, suits the false faiths such as the New Age perfectly, as it is used to vindicate their own false teaching as being in harmony with Jesus Christ (Collie, 1995). The very essence of Christ’s deity is relegated to vagueness and He is often presented as just a great moral teacher; perhaps the greatest the world has known, but still just a teacher and nothing more (Word In Life, 1996:1658).

2. Establishing the deity of Jesus Christ

Foundational remarks

The evidence that is presented here will show that Jesus was indeed a historic person possessing two distinct and perfect natures: both God and man. The evidence is presented in six-fold format:

- Christ's own claims
 - The character he displayed
 - His resurrection from the dead
 - The Gospel of John
 - The epistle to the Hebrews
 - Paul as witness of Christ's deity
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2.1 Christ's own claims

Christ's self-centred teaching

Whereas other great religious teachers of the world pointed men away from themselves, saying 'That is the truth as I see it; follow that', Jesus said, 'I am the truth; follow Me' (Stott, 1971:4). Throughout the gospels He is seen to point towards Himself:

- *"I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst."* (John 6:35)
- *"I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life."* (John 8:12)
- *"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live."* (John 11:25)
- *"Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me'."* (John 14:6)
- *"Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me..."* (Matthew 11:28,29)

A remarkable feature of this teaching is that it came from One who insisted on humility in others. It is written that He even rebuked his own disciples for their self-seeking and desire to be great (Mark 8:29-33 and 10:35-40).

Christ's direct claims

Perhaps the most dramatic instance of Christ's direct claims is the record of his visit to the synagogue in Nazareth, because it took place in the midst of those before whom He grew up and who knew Him as the son of Joseph, the carpenter. After reading to them from the Scriptures Isaiah 61:1-2, Jesus said, *"Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing"*. (Luke 4:21) It is the first recorded word of his public ministry.

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2. Establishing the deity of Jesus Christ, Continued

Christ's direct claims (continued)

His claim to the titles 'Son of man' and 'Son of God', may be seen mostly as Messianic titles. Yet his claim to be the Son of God was more than that. It described a unique and eternal relationship with God:

- Although He taught his disciples that God was their Father too, He very clearly distinguished between the two sets of relationships. For example, He said to Mary Magdalene, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father'. He did not put them all on the same level by using the phrase 'our Father'. (Stott, 1971:5 & John 20:17)
- He identified so closely with God the Father, He said that to:
 - know Him was to know God (John 8:19);
 - see Him was to see God (John 14:9);
 - believe in Him was to believe in God (John 12:44);
 - receive Him was to receive God (Mark 9:37);
 - hate Him was to hate God (John 15:23); and
 - to honour Him was to honour God (John 5:23).
- Jesus said to them, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM' (John 8:58). This was a direct claim to have been existing eternally. It was also a direct claim to deity – the name 'I Am' by which Jehovah revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush. The Jews realised exactly what Jesus was claiming and reached for stones to kill Him. But the time was not there for his triumphant death yet. Anderson remarks on this that no confirmatory evidence is more convincing than that of hostile witnesses (<http://www.gospelcom.net/>).
- On the Sunday following Easter Day, Jesus appeared to the disciples in the upper room. He invited the doubting Thomas to feel his wounds, to which Thomas cried out, 'my Lord and my God!' It is significant to note that Jesus then rebuked Thomas for his unbelief, but not for his worship (John 20:26-29)

Christ's indirect claims

Christ's claim to deity was advanced as forcefully by indirect claims as it was by his direct claims (Stott, 1971:6). Four such instances are:

- He claimed to forgive people's sins (Word in Life, 1996:1658). Direct declarations of forgiveness were made to a paralytic (Matthew 9:2) and an immoral woman (Luke 7:47-48).
- Christ's second indirect claim was to bestow life. Examples are found in John 10:28: "*And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of my hand*", and John 17:2: "*as You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him.*"

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2. Establishing the deity of Jesus Christ, Continued

Christ's indirect claims (continued)

- He claimed to teach the truth, not as the scribes who taught by quoting their authorities, or the prophets who spoke with the authority of Jehovah. Christ claimed authority of his own, saying ‘Most assuredly, I say to you...’
- Perhaps the most outstanding of Christ’s claims was that humanity would ultimately be accountable to Him, for example Matthew 25:31-34, 41:
“When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world’ ... Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”

These were indeed astonishing claims.

Christ's dramatised claims: Miracles and wonders

The miracles Christ worked are not discussed here in any detail. They are well accounted for in all the gospels.

What is important to note, however, is that the value of Christ’s miracles lies more in their spiritual significance than in their supernatural character. They were never performed in a selfish manner or for their own sake. It can be said that they were illustrations of authority and not of power.

After Christ’s death, resurrection and ascension, the miracles continued through the work of his disciples in his Name! Contrary to some thinking, it was not only limited to the Twelve (the foundational apostles), for example the work of Philip in Samaria (Acts 8:5-8). **It also continues in the church today, albeit sadly on an extremely limited scale.** In his consideration as to why it is not a common occurrence in the church anymore, Murray (1982:16) comes to the conclusion: ‘Because of your unbelief.’

2.2 Christ’s character

Stott (1971:10) underlines the fact that the character Jesus displayed during his earthly life was such that his enemies eventually had to hire false witnesses against Him. But even then they could not agree with each other. Again and again He was pronounced righteous – by Pilate, Herod, Judas the traitor, the penitent thief on the cross, and finally also the centurion, after watching Jesus suffer and die.

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2. Establishing the deity of Jesus Christ, Continued

Christ's character (continued)

One can make your own assessment too. The gospel accounts are there to be scrutinised. Throughout all of them one finds a Jesus that is

- consistent;
- unselfish; and
- humble despite his self-centred teaching

Christ exhibited an utter disregard for self in the service of God and man. After being misrepresented, despised and rejected by his own people, deserted by his friends, flogged and nailed to a cross, He could still pray to his Father to forgive of his tormentors (Luke 23:34).

2.3 The resurrection of Christ

According to Erickson (1992:211) the meaning of an event is the meaning attached to it by those into whose history it came. To the Jews of Jesus' time, his resurrection would have signified divinity. It is important to note that in the Jewish polemic against the Christian message of Jesus' resurrection there is no claim that his grave was not empty. This makes out strong evidence to establish the historicity of the resurrection, which is in itself proof of Jesus' deity.

Stott (1971:11) argues that the resurrection does not establish Christ's deity, but is consistent with it.

Different theories have been invented to explain the empty tomb and disappearance of the body in a way that dismisses the resurrection. They are not discussed here, for not one of them have the support of historical evidence (Stott, 1971:13). See the introduction for some examples - they are all speculation.

Evidence in support of the resurrection include the following (Stott, 1971:12-16):

- The body was gone and no other feasible explanation have ever been presented.
- the grave clothes were undisturbed (and not folded up as is often believed). the Lord was seen and ten such appearances have been recorded. A study of these appearances reveal a variety of the circumstances of person, place and mood in which they occurred. He was seen by individuals (Mary Magdalene, Peter and James), by small groups and by more than five hundred people together. Jesus appeared in the garden of the tomb, near Jerusalem, in the upper room, on the road to Emmaus, by the Lake of Galilee, on a Galilee mountain and on the Mount of Olives. Moods ranged from weeping, to astonishment, to remorse, incredulity and distraction. It is impossible to dismiss all the evidence as hallucinations or inventions. The risen Lord was truly seen.

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2. Establishing the deity of Jesus Christ, Continued

The resurrection of Christ (continued)

- The disciples were changed dramatically. Simple fishermen became powerful preachers and evangelists, even unto death! Saul turned from fervently persecuting the Christian church to a position on the forefront of those working to establish the Christian church. James, a brother of Jesus, is first presented as one who did not believe (John 7:5). Yet, he later became a leader in the church in Jerusalem (Word In Life, 1996:2249).

It has remained impossible for sceptics through the ages to provide adequate explanations for the phenomena described here, other than the Christian belief that Christ is risen indeed.

2.4 The Gospel of John

To a large extent, the Gospel of John is a description of the identity of Jesus. He starts with the powerful statement that “*in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*” (John 1:1). This introductory picture of Jesus is the core message that John follows throughout his gospel account. Jesus’ deity can be seen from every chapter of this book and is enhanced by the names John uses to describe Him, for example:

- Only begotten Son
- Lamb of God
- Son of God
- Resurrection
- Life
- The Vine

Repetition of the “I Am” phrase several times also reinforces Christ’s deity:

- “I am the bread of life” (6:35)
- “I am the light of the world” ((8:12)
- “I am the door of the sheep” (10:7)
- “I am the good shepherd” (10:11)
- “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25)
- “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (14:6)
- “I am the true vine” (15:1)

Is this perhaps stretching the “I Am” concept too far? It is proposed that this view of Christ is absolutely consistent with Exodus 3:14: “*I AM WHO I AM*”. This is clearly in no way a restrictive name, but an all encompassing one!

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2. Establishing the deity of Jesus Christ, Continued

2.5 The Epistle of Hebrews

In many ways, the Book of Hebrews represents the roots of the New Testament. It celebrates Christ as the fulfilment of Old Testament Judaism (Word in Life: 2215). This book is most emphatic regarding Christ's divinity (1:1-3):

“God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person...”

Jesus is described as superior to angels (1:4-2:9), Moses (3:1-6), and the high priests (4:14-5:10). Erickson (1992:210) concludes in this regard that Jesus is superior for He is not merely a human or an angel, but something higher, namely God.

2.6 Paul as witness of Christ's deity

Paul, the erstwhile prosecutor of the church, frequently witnesses to his belief in the deity of Christ (Erickson, 1992:210), for example:

- “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.” (Col 1:15)
 - “And He is before all things.” (Col 1:17)
 - “For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell.” (Col 1:19)
 - “I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom.” (2 Tim 4:1)
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3. Conclusion

Misguided efforts?

The efforts of movements such as the Jesus Seminar and individual theologians to discredit traditional Christian teaching, as well as attempts by Christian theologians to fend off the critiques, have led to the creation of an edifice of critical theological scholarship by which a believable “real Jesus” might emerge to view. The result has often been a kind of “modernised” Jesus, whose ethical genius and message of a spiritual kingdom brought him close to the liberal ideas of 19th century German Protestantism (Pearson).

Could it be then, that statements in the New Testament were made by a few misguided followers of the man? Could they have misread the signals? Was their desire to find and know the promised Messiah so strong that they developed the idea of Jesus’ deity on their own?

The resurrection

Frank Morrison, an agnostic journalist, set out to write a book refuting the resurrection of Christ. After much investigation, his opinion changed and he became a believer (McDowell & Stewart, 1993).

Morrison concluded that the body of Christ was publicly put in the tomb on Friday, but that it was missing on the Sunday. If He did not rise from the dead, someone must have taken the body. There are three interest groups to consider for such an act:

- **The Romans** would not have accomplished anything through it. They wanted to keep the peace in Palestine and would not jeopardise it in any such way.
- **The Jews** would not have risked giving Jesus’ disciples any grounds for proclaiming a resurrection.
- **The close disciples of Jesus** had no reason to steal the body. If they did, it means that, with the exception of John who was not martyred, they later died a terrible death for something they knew to be untrue. Their actions of proclaiming a religion emphasising the truth, would not have been consistent with what they knew to be true and commanded others to follow.

The only reasonable explanation is that Christ has risen, and evidence of eyewitnesses confirmed that this was the case. Peter wrote *“For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty”* (2 Pet. 1:16).

Morrison concludes that his finding was not the result of facts that altered, for they are recorded imperishably in the monuments and in the pages of human history. But the interpretation to be put on the facts underwent a change.

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3. Conclusion, Continued

Concluding remarks

The historical evidence for Christ's deity is more than sufficient to satisfy the curiosity of an honest inquirer. Those who honestly seek the truth in their religious life and take the Scriptures on its face value, will find that in the Name of Jesus, the sick are still being healed and the demon oppressed are being set free. If Jesus had only been a humanly philosopher, such signs and wonders would most certainly not have taken place in his name. The fact that this manifest show of His power is not a more common occurrence wherever Christians meet, was explained in simple terms by Andrew Murray: Because of your unbelief (1982:12-16).

The deity of Jesus Christ separates Him from all other religious figures. In the major religions of the world one finds that the teachings, and not the teacher, are all-important (McDowell & Stewart, 1993). This principle applies to Confucianism, to Islam, to Buddhism and especially to Hinduism which has no historic founder.

At the centre of Christianity, however, is the person of Jesus Christ. He did not just claim to be teaching mankind the truth; He claimed that He was the truth (John 14:6).

What Jesus taught is not the important aspect of Christianity, but **who He was**. The evidence presented shows that He was indeed the Son of God, who He claimed to be.

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