

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Series:	The Deity of Christ		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	12		Gary L.W. Johnson
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WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO SAVE SINNERS? (Part II)

Jesus has become a very hot topic over the last few years. From the cover stories in *Time*, *Newsweek* and *U.S. News & World Report*, to the special TV “documentaries” that followed in the wake of Dale Brown’s mega bestseller (along with the movie) “The Da Vinci Code” – all claiming in one way or the other that the *real* Jesus is not the one that the NT and orthodox Christianity have proclaimed.¹ What *all* of these attempts at reconstructing Jesus share in common is an outright rejection of the NT as a reliable source of information.

Stephen Prothero, in his new book *Religious Literacy* (Harper San Francisco, 2007), points to a November 2000 poll showing that 75 percent of American adults believe – wrongly – that the Bible says, “God helps those who help themselves.” Ten percent think Noah’s wife was Joan of Arc. Research by the Gallup Organization shows that most Americans claim they believe in the Ten Commandments, but few can name them. Only half of the American Christians polled know who preached the Sermon on the Mount. (Hint: It wasn’t Billy Graham). Close to 50 percent of American adults read the Bible “seldom” or “never.” “Although the level of formal education of the U.S. population has climbed dramatically since the 1940’s, surveys show that the level of biblical literacy has not kept pace, says researcher George Gallup, Jr., “Americans, both church and unchurch, remain ‘biblical illiterates.’”² Last week we looked at four of the six things that the Bible says is absolutely essential in answering the question, “What Does it Take to Save Sinners?” 1. A Triune God; 2. An Incarnate Son; 3. A Second Adam; 4. A Vicarious Penal Atonement. What else is needed?

- V. ***A RESURRECTED & ASCENDED GLORIFIED SAVIOUR.*** The resurrection of Christ is foundational to the gospel, apart from which there is NO gospel, according to the Apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 15. As Robert Letham succinctly put it, “Therefore, the relation between the resurrection of Christ in AD 30 and ours at the end of the world is so close, so unbreakable, that if one part were not true, the other would also be false. They are parts of the same reality, much like a piece of cake sliced into two, or as identical twins are two segments of the same fertilized egg. In post-Einsteinian physics it has been demonstrated that the parts of a tiny subatomic particle, split in two and separated by infinite space, will behave identically. In a somewhat analogous manner, the resurrection is a single phenomenon, its parts separated by indefinite time. Thus the nature of the resurrection body is the same both for Christ and for us (verses 42-49). As Adam was the one who initiated the race, ‘a living being,’ bequeathing a body subject to weakness, corruption and death, so the risen Christ, ‘a life-giving spirit,’ is the first fruits (*cf.* verses 20, 23) of those who belong to him and who will share in the resurrection body, which is powerful, glorious, incorruptible and under the impetus of the Holy Spirit. Once again, the salvation of the individual and the church are inseparable, while the resurrection of Christ, in which we share, is empowered by the Spirit, the post-resurrection Christ being ‘a life-giving Spirit’ (that close connection between the risen

Christ and Spirit again!) with the resurrection body a ‘spiritual,’ a pneumatic, body.”³ Likewise, the ascension is highlighted in the NT with language, images and metaphors all designed to underscore the triumphant nature of Christ’s work. “As his resurrection was the means to his ascension, and so a significant aspect of his total exaltation, so his ascension in turn was the means to his climactic exaltation and enthronement (*sessio*) at the Father’s right hand as Holy One, Lord, Christ, Prince, and Savior of the world (Acts 2:27, 33-36; 5:31; Rom. 8:34; Col. 3:1; Phil. 2:9-11; Heb. 1:3). If his ascension was ‘in glory’ (1 Tim. 3:16), exalting him thereby ‘higher than all the heavens’ (Eph. 4:10; Heb. 7:26), he is also now ‘crowned with glory and honor’ (Heb. 2:9), ‘with angels, authorities, and powers in submission to him’ (1 Pe. 3:22), with ‘everything under his feet,’ the Father alone excepted (1 Cor. 15:26; Eph. 1:21a), sitting ‘far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come’ (Eph. 1:22-23), indeed, who fills ‘the whole universe’ (*ta panta*) with his power and lordship (Eph. 4:10). In sum, he now occupies the ‘highest place’ (Phil. 2:9) of glory and honor (Heb. 2:9) which heaven can afford, and to him belongs *de jure* and *de facto* the titles ‘Lord of all’ (Acts 10:36; Rom. 10:12) and Lord above all other lords (Acts 2:36; Phil. 2:9b; Rev. 19:16), ‘that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord’ (Phil. 2:10-11a). The nature of his lordship entitles him sovereignty to bestow gifts of every and of whatever kind upon men as he pleases (Eph. 4:7-8, 11).”⁴

VI. THE DIRECT CREATIVE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. This is, in the language used by Reformed theologians over the centuries, the application of the finished work of Christ accomplished in redemption. This includes effectual calling, regeneration, faith and repentance, justification, adoption, Union with Christ, sanctification, perseverance and finally, glorification. It is God the Holy Spirit, the Author and Lord of all life that does this. Apart from whom we are lifeless.

Veni, Creator Spiritus,
 Spiritus recreator
 Tu deus, Tu datus coelitus,
 Tu donum, tu donator⁵

CONCLUSION: Warfield, in his usual way, captures the picture the NT paints of Jesus. I quote him at length.

“Before looking at some of the more important passages that addressed the doctrine of the deity of Christ, I want to give an overview of how the NT presents the Person of Christ. Only an outline of this portrait can be set down here. Jesus appears in it not only a supernatural, but in all the sources alike specifically a divine person, who came into the world on a mission of mercy to sinful man. Such a mission was in its essence a humiliation and involved humiliation at every step of its accomplishment. His life is represented accordingly as a life of difficulty and conflict, of trial and suffering, issuing in a shameful death. But this humiliation is represented as in every step and stage of it voluntary. It was entered into and abided in solely in the interests of His mission, and did not argue at any point of it helplessness in the face of the difficulties which hemmed Him in more and more until they led Him to death on the cross. It rather manifested His strong determination to fulfill His mission to the end, to drink to its dregs the cup He had undertaken to drink. Accordingly, every suggestion of escape from it by the use of His intrinsic divine powers, either of omnipotence or of omniscience, was treated by Him first and last as a temptation of the evil one. The death in which His life ends is conceived, therefore, as the goal in which His life culminates. He came into the world to die, and every stage of the road that led up to this issue was determined not for Him but by Him: He was never the victim but always the Master of circumstance, and pursued His pathway from beginning to end, not merely in full knowledge from the start of all its turns and twists up to its bitter conclusion, but in complete control both of them and of it.

“His life of humiliation, sinking into His terrible death, was therefore not his misfortune, but His achievement as the promised Messiah, by and in whom the kingdom of God is to be established in the world; it was the work which as Messiah he came to do. Therefore, in his prosecution of it, He from the beginning announced himself as the Messiah, accepted all ascriptions to him of Messiahship under whatever designation, and thus gathered up into His person all the preadumbrations of Old-Testament prophecy; and by His favorite self-designation of ‘Son of Man,’ derived from Daniel’s great vision (vii. 13), continually proclaimed Himself the Messiah he actually was, emphasizing in contrast with His present humiliation His heavenly origin and His future glory. Moreover, in the midst of His humiliation, He exercised, so far as that was consistent with the performance of his mission, all the prerogatives of that ‘transcendent’ or divine Messiah which He was. He taught with authority, substituting for every other sanction His great ‘But I say unto you,’ and declaring Himself greater than the greatest of God’s representatives whom He had sent in all the past to visit His people. He surrounded Himself as he went about preaching the Gospel of the kingdom with a miraculous nimbus, each and every miracle in which was adapted not merely to manifest the presence of a supernatural person in the midst of the people, but, as a piece of symbolical teaching, to reveal the nature of this supernatural person, and to afford a foretaste of the blessedness of His rule in the kingdom He came to found. He assumed plenary authority over the religious ordinances of the people, divinely established though they were; and exercised absolute control over the laws of nature themselves. The divine prerogative of forgiving sins he claimed for Himself, the divine power of reading the heart He frankly exercised, the divine function of judge of quick and dead he attached to His own person. Asserting for Himself a superhuman dignity of person, or rather a share in the ineffable Name itself, He represented Himself as abiding continually even when on earth in absolute communion with God the Father, and participating by necessity of nature in the treasures of the divine knowledge and grace; announced Himself the source of all divine knowledge and grace to men; and drew to Himself all the religious affections, suspending the destinies of men absolutely upon their relation to His own person. Nevertheless he walked straight onward in the path of His lowly mission, and, bending even the wrath of men in His service, gave Himself in His own good time and way to the death He had come to accomplish. Then, His mission performed, He rose again from the dead in the power of His deathless life; showed Himself alive to chosen witnesses, that He might strengthen the hearts of His people; and ascended to the right hand of God, whence He directs the continued preparation of the kingdom until it shall please Him to return for its establishment in its glorious eternal form.

“It is important to fix firmly in mind the central conception of this representation. It turns upon the sacrificial death of Jesus to which the whole life leads up, and out of which all its issues are drawn, and for a perpetual memorial of which he is represented as having instituted a solemn memorial feast. The divine majesty of this Son of God; His redemptive mission to the world, in a life of humiliation and a ransoming death; the completion of his task in accordance with His purpose; His triumphant rising from the death thus vicariously endured; His assumption of sovereignty over the future development of the kingdom founded in His blood, and over the world as the theater of its development; His expected return as the consummator of the ages and the judge of all – this is the circle of ideas in which all accounts move. It is the portrait not of a merely human life, though it includes the delineation of a complete and a completely human life. It is the portrayal of a human episode in the divine life. It is, therefore, not merely connected with supernatural occurrences, nor merely colored by supernatural features, nor merely set in a supernatural atmosphere: the supernatural is its very substance, the elimination of which would be the evaporation of the whole. The Jesus of the New Testament is not fundamentally man, however divinely gifted: He is God tabernacling for a while among men, with heaven lying about Him not merely in His infancy, but throughout all the days of His flesh.

“The intense supernaturalism of this portraiture is, of course, an offense to our anti-supernaturalistic age. It is only what was to be expected, therefore, that throughout the last century and a half a long series of scholars, imbued with the anti-supernaturalistic instinct of the time, have assumed the task of desupernaturalizing it. Great difficulty has been experienced, however, in the attempt to construct a historical sieve which will strain out miracles and yet let Jesus through; for Jesus is Himself the greatest

miracle of them all. Accordingly in the end of the day there is a growing disposition, as if in despair of accomplishing this feat, boldly to construct the sieve so as to strain out Jesus too; to take refuge in the counsel of desperation which affirms that there never was such a person as Jesus, that Christianity had no founder, and that not merely the portrait of Jesus, but Jesus Himself, is a pure projection of later ideals into the past. The main stream of assault still addresses itself, however, to the attempt to eliminate not Jesus Himself, but the Jesus of the Evangelists, and to substitute for Him a de-supernaturalized Jesus.”⁶

ENDNOTES

¹In the summer of 1999, ABC devoted a special on the life of Christ with Peter Jennings reporting: *The Search for Jesus*. The program acknowledged that today, as in his own time, Jesus remains one of history’s most intriguing and enigmatic figures, who is as allusive and mysterious as ever. Not to be outdone, CBS gave us the miniseries *Jesus* in May 2000. This Jesus turns out to be a New Age sensitive guy who would fit nicely in most of the TV sitcoms. More recently (March 8, 2004), ABC gave us *Judas*, a made-for-TV movie. *Judas* begins by stating that, “the following film is an interpretative dramatization of Judas’s relationship with Jesus.” What exactly the film is interpreting is not clear, since it is most certainly not working from the Bible or accepted historic documents, except in rough outline. Most of the dialogue hovers between the painfully funny and just plain painful. Judas first meets the Messiah after witnessing Jesus clearing the Temple of merchants. Judas to Jesus, over a cup of wine: “You know, I have to tell you, I was very impressed with what you did at the Temple today.” Jesus replies, somewhat chagrined and regretful, “Well, don’t be. You know, I was trying to make a point and lost my temper. You can’t change a man’s heart by yelling at him, by humiliating him, by raking away his livelihood.” Later, Jesus asks Judas to handle His money, saying, “I’m no good with money. Whatever I have, I tend to lose.” In another scene, Herod refers to John the Baptist as “a pain in the ass.” More recently, Jeff Jensen wrote in the pages of *Entertainment Weekly* (Dec. 22, 2006), “It’s been a tough year for Jesus. First, the *Da Vinci Code* spreads rumors about his sex life. Then his pal Mel Gibson makes a spectacle of himself. And now, just in time for his birthday, this documentary (CNN Presents: *After Jesus – The First Christians* aired Dec. 20 from 7-9 pm) suggests everything we know about Christianity might be wrong. Christ as divine Messiah? Irrelevant. The Gospels Politicized and dubious. Blah blah blasphemy. Or not. Who knows? It’s all a matter of faith anyway. But if that’s the small point of this competently packaged rehash of familiar scholarship and smarty-pants skepticism, why bother?” The usual class of liberal scholars are trotted out and portrayed as infallible experts: Bart Ehrman, Blaire Pfann, Amy-Fill Levine, Robin Griffith-Jones, Lawrence Schiffmann, Richard Freund, Marvin Meyer, and Gerald O’Collins. Ehrman appears the most. Ehrman, you will remember from an earlier reference, is a graduate of Moody Bible Institute, who lost his faith in graduate school and is now a dogmatic skeptic; his NY Times bestseller, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (Harper Collins, 2005), is a tour de force example of his hostility to his former faith. Reoccurring throughout the program are these old liberal canards: The NT Gospels are flawed and inaccurate; the Apostle Paul invented Christianity; and The Early Church Fathers suppressed the *real* gospel, i.e., The Gnostics’ story. Not to be outdone (Dec. 17) the National Geographic Channel aired “The Secret Lives of Jesus.” The cover story for the Dec. 18, 2006 issue of *U. S. News & World Report* was “The Gospel Truth: Why some old books are stirring up a new debate about the meaning of Jesus.” The storyline was the same. The Gnostics were the “good guys” and the early church fathers (Ignatius, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Athanasius and Augustine) were the black-hatted “bad guys.” Brace yourselves. This kind of debunking of historic orthodoxy is only going to intensify.

²As cited by Jeffrey Overstreet, “Are We Biblically Illiterate? (and Does it Really Matter?)” in *Response* (Spring 2007), p. 10.

³R. Letham, *The Work of Christ: Contours of Christian Theology* (IVP, 1993), p. 221.

⁴R. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Thomas Nelson, 1998), p. 579.

⁵This Latin phrase means, “Come, Creator Spirit, Spirit, Restorer, You are God, You have given from heaven, You are gift, You are the Giver,” cf. B. B. Warfield, *The Person and Work of The Holy Spirit* (rpt. Calvary Press, 1997), p. 156.

⁶*The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, III (rpt. Baker, 1981), pp. 160-163.