

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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<b>Series:</b>	<b>The Deity of Christ</b>		Pastor/Teacher
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### THE DIVINE SON

The contemporary Catholic scholar Hans Küng, in seeking to answer the question, “Who was Jesus Christ?” has concluded that Jesus did not assume any titles implying messianic dignity, such as Messiah, Son of David, Son of God, or even Son. All these titles were given to Him afterward by the Christian community. This is amazing, especially since there is no record of the church giving Jesus of Nazareth any title beyond the days of the early church but the title *Redeemer*. Did the church give Him the many titles recorded in the New Testament, and then suddenly suspend the practice? It is not surprising that the Roman Catholic Church has stripped Professor Küng of his status as a Catholic theologian.<sup>1</sup> Jesus asked his disciples at Caesarea Philippi the question we are interested in, “Who do men say that I the Son of man am?” (Matt. 16:13). Later He asked the Jewish leaders essentially the same question, “What think ye of Christ? Whose son is he?” (22:42). Strikingly, both gave scriptural answers, although that coming from the disciples is the more memorable one. Peter, speaking for them, said, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God” (16:16). I have concluded from the previous three studies that Peter’s answer is correct. Jesus of Nazareth is the promised Messiah, the divine Son of the Living God. The reasons that support this conclusion are these:

- (1) First, the texts of the New Testament support the doctrine as we have seen from our previous studies.
- (2) Second, the indirect evidence supports the doctrine. This type of evidence is of the greatest importance, because it does not represent an ideological attempt to “prove” Jesus’ deity. It is the necessary outcome of the everyday life and language of our Lord and of the disciples’ response to Him and His words. It reaches its climax in their *worship* of Him. As a fine scholar wrote not long ago, “The basic fact which lies behind all the theological terms and titles is the worship of the carpenter.”<sup>2</sup> This fact becomes even more remarkable when we remember the strictly Unitarian monotheism in which the disciples had been brought up. Their pietistic Judaism would have caused them to rebel against the worship of our Lord naturally, but they felt compelled to do so. It was an irresistible compulsion from within through the Holy Spirit that forced them to bow before Him. To account for it led the Church to the acknowledgement of His full deity.
- (3) Third, church tradition, then, confirms the textual and indirect evidence. We cited Nicea’s famous statement, that He was “God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things were made.” We recognize and acknowledge that the creeds are not divinely revealed statements, but they represent the combined testimony of a Spirit-guided church. But surely, one might say, Arius and other early churchmen, while judged heretical by the church, were intelligent men. They claimed adherence to the Bible. They must have had some basis for their differences, must they not? Let us look at some of the texts to which they appealed.

## I. **THE PROBLEM OF MARK 10:18**

- A. **The context of the passage.** The passage is found in Mark 10:17-27 and concerns the Rich Young Ruler. It is a misunderstood passage, some finding in it salvation by good works, others Unitarianism, and still others a confession of sin by Jesus. It really says none of these things. Many Christians, however, find it difficult to explain our Lord's words to the young man. The young man was rich, young, prominent, as well as "clean, keen, and reverent."<sup>3</sup> In fact, he was the kind of man a mother might desire for her daughter! He seemed to have everything, wealth, influence, religion, and uprightness. All the keys of life were hanging at his girdle. His question to our Lord was, "Good Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" (Mark 10:17). Our Lord's reply brings us to the problem. He responded to the young man, "Why called thou me good? There is none good but one, that is, God" (v. 18). Now what did He mean by that reply?
- B. **The interpretation of the text.** There have been different interpretations of our Lord's reply. *First*, there is the one espoused by the Arians, who denied the full deity of Christ. They contended that our Lord repudiated the predicate "good," thus rejecting full deity. Modern Arians have even contended that His reply was a confession of sin.<sup>4</sup> He was only seeking to lead men to the perfect worship of God, they have said. The context argues against this view. In fact verse 21, with its "follow me," leads in a quite different direction. If He was confessing sin, how could He say, "follow me?" One of the most respected 20<sup>th</sup> century interpreters propounded a *second* interpretation. He contended that our Lord did not intend any contrast at all between God and Himself by the use of the pronoun "me." He was simply telling the young man that he would find the answer to his question, if he went to God and His published law for the answer. God is good, and the answer lies in His Word.<sup>5</sup> A *third* view is much more convincing to me. The use of the pronoun "me" does raise the question of the ruler's perhaps inadequate knowledge of the Lord. Why use the term "me" at all, if Jesus is not pointing the young man to a deeper consideration of Himself? Further, the initial question of the rich young ruler indicates an erroneous doctrine of salvation. He seems to think life comes from doing something, a Pelagian attitude. He apparently does not really understand that, apart from divine enablement, he cannot do anything that will please God (cf. Rom. 8:7-8). And so our Lord will point him to the Law of Moses, specifically the second table of that law, designed by God to bring to men under it the knowledge of their sin (cf. Rom. 3:20; 7:7-12). I, therefore, think the early church fathers, such as Ambrose, Athanasius, the two Gregorys, Chrysostom, Jerome, Augustine, and others,<sup>6</sup> including many modern commentators, were right in saying that our Lord's question is designed to incite the young man to further inquiry, and particularly to a deeper consideration of the person of the Lord Himself. The young man had addressed Him as "Good Master" (lit. *good teacher*). Since the ruler seems to regard Him as a mere teacher, Jesus questions the application of the adjective, "good," to Him. The adjective belongs only to God. Thus, to call Jesus "good," if He were simply an ordinary teacher, is to misuse the adjective. The Lord, then, stirs the young man to consider Him and the terms that he was using of Him. If he had replied to our Lord's response with, "But Lord, you are God," then Jesus could have replied to him, "Believe in Me, and you shall inherit eternal life." The text turns on the proper sense of the word "good" and the young man's understanding of the true nature of the person he had approached. In a moment He demands of the young man, "follow Me" (v. 21). That is the prerogative of God alone. No prophet ever presumed to say, "follow me." Even the great Samuel, remarkable for his integrity, did not suggest that others should follow him as his disciples. In fact, in that very passage in which his unshakeable integrity is described, he calls upon Israel "to turn not aside from following the Lord" (v. 20). In

the Old Testament the concept *following* in a spiritual sense has as its object God Himself. When Jesus called upon fellow Israelites to “follow” Him, the implication is plain: He was claiming deity. It is clear, then, that Mark 10:18 is no denial of our Lord’s deity, nor is it a confession of sin on His part. This conclusion is strengthened by a closer look at Jesus’ words. He did not say, “There is none good but one, that is, the *Father*,” but “God.” Jesus is not the Father. If He had said that, then “good” would not be applicable to Him. He said, “God.” “Good” is properly applied to the Lord Jesus Christ, when the user of the word knows who He really is, for He is God the Son.

## II. THE PROBLEM OF MARK 13:32

- A. *The context of the text.* At the conclusion of the Olivet Discourse, that great prophetic treatment of the last days of the age and the second coming of the Lord, Jesus told a parable concerning a fig tree to alert His hearers to the signs of the events to come and to exhort them to watch expectantly for the consummation (cf. Mark 13:28-33). In the midst of the parable are the words that have puzzled many, “But on that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father” (v. 32).
- B. *The interpretation of the text.* First, the statement does not stand alone, but is related to others in which He, or others, underline the genuine humanity of the Son. Ultimately, the answer to the puzzle of the text is found in a theological question, since Jesus did not explain His words. The question is phrased by Stalker correctly, “How can the omniscience of the Second Person of the Trinity be reconciled with the ignorance of Jesus?” The answer, of course, lies in the self-humbling of the Second Person (cf. Phil. 2:7). A careful reading of the statement will show that our Lord implies that He is not simply an ordinary man. Notice that His words distinguish four planes of knowledge, that of men, angels, the Son, and the Father. The order is an ascending one, and He puts Himself above men, and above angels, the highest of *created* beings. Now if one should attempt to take the position that the Son is an intermediate being between angels and the Father, that impossible position is shown to be erroneous by the baptismal formula (cf. Matt. 28:19). But is there not some sense of subordination suggested by the order of terms? Well, yes. The subordination is that of the mediatorial mission in which Jesus is engaged when he utters the statement. For that work and during that time He does subject Himself to the Father’s will (cf. John 5:19, 30; 6:38; 1 Cor. 15:24-28). As Vincent Taylor has said, “. . . self limitation is an essential form of the divine manifestation. God is God when He stoops no less than when He reigns.”<sup>7</sup>

## III. THE PROBLEM OF JOHN 14:28

- A. *The context of the text.* In the Upper Room Discourse Jesus prepares His men for the time when He will be no longer in their midst physically. It is filled with comfort, consolation, instruction, and exhortation. In chapter 14, verses 25-31, He dwells on His return to His Father; He tells the apostles that His departure is the condition of His return to them through the indwelling Spirit. Further, He wishes them to realize what it means for Him, too. He is returning to the Father, which means for Him the resumption of the divine glory (cf. 17:1-5). He appeals to their love for Him. Given that, they should be rejoicing for Him over His return to the Father.
- B. *The interpretation of the text.* In the midst of this tender paragraph is found the strange and puzzling clause, “for my Father is greater than I” (v. 28). In the light of this statement did the church overstate itself in claiming that Christ was *co-essential with the Father*? Is subordinationism, perhaps, right after all? “Does not the idea of pre-existence overstress Christ’s *having come* and neglect somewhat his *being sent*?”

Berkouwer asks.<sup>8</sup> Cf. John 5:19-20, 20 (but note v. 23, “even as”); 11:42-43; 12:44, 49-50. Now there are several things to bear in mind here. *First*, comparisons are properly made between things of the same nature. What kind of comparison can be judiciously made of apples and lawnmowers? Comparisons are made between things of the same species and, if that is so, then in this case the comparison Jesus suggests is itself an indication of a unity of essence with the Father. But, *second*, and more significantly, let us remember what status Jesus had at the point of time that He made the statement. The superiority of the Father is mentioned while our Lord is involved in the messianic mediatorial work of offering the atoning sacrifice. The Son in His humiliation will through suffering make His way to the Father for glorification.<sup>9</sup> Thus, like the Arians, modern objectors to the deity of Christ often ignore the historical context of the statement. His time of mediatorial humiliation was a time when He was in submission to the Father. At that time it could be said correctly, as our Lord did say, “my Father is greater than I.” B. B. Warfield, who in my opinion was the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s theologian par excellence, wrote concerning the text, “Obviously this means that there was a sense in which He had ceased to be equal with the Father, because of the humiliation of His present condition, and insofar as this humiliation involved entrance into a status lower than that which belonged to Him by nature. Precisely in what this humiliation consisted can be gathered only from the general implication of many statements. In it He was ‘a man:’ ‘A man who had told you the truth, which I have heard from God’ (viii. 40), where the contrast with ‘God’ throws the assertion of humanity into emphasis (cf. x. 33) . . . Only one human characteristic [I would prefer to say, “one post-fall human characteristic”] was alien to Him: He was without sin: ‘the prince of the world,’ He declared, ‘hath nothing in me’ (xiv. 30; cf. viii. 46). Clearly our Lord, as reported by John, knew Himself to be true God and true man in one indivisible person, the common subject of the qualities which belong to each.”<sup>10</sup> *Third*, it is sometimes said that the statement relates to the humanity of the Lord alone. There is an element of truth in this, for our Lord did surrender the voluntary use of His divine attributes in the days of His flesh, but there is more to the matter than that. More to the point is it to say that the Son does not speak of His *essence* in the statement, but of His *office*, namely, that of Messiah. He is the Mediator, subordinate to the Father for a time (cf. 1 Cor. 15:20-28). The Father, Jesus means, is greater in *office and position*. Confirming this is His careful use of terms. He says, “for *the Father* is greater than I am,” not “for *God* is greater than I.” The language is that of the *kenosis*, the self-humiliation of the Servant of the Lord until the mediatorial work is accomplished. (Phil. 2:5-9).

**CONCLUSION:** In the mid-1970s, John Hicks edited a book written by a number of British scholars entitled, *The Myth of God Incarnate*.<sup>11</sup> It was a sensational, but blatantly heretical, book. It was a symposium of essays whose overall intent was to dispel the historical understanding of the person of Christ by casting doubt on the way the doctrine of Christ has been framed. Had the church been correct, it asked, in thinking that the New Testament authors expected their words about Jesus to be taken at face value? Is it not a mistake to substitute for their metaphors a metaphysical way of thinking of him as God? Is the traditional, Chalcedonian conception internally coherent, and is it credible any longer in the 20<sup>th</sup> century? The authors of the symposium achieved notoriety overnight. Indeed, the publicity and controversy which their book provoked was out of all proportion to the intrinsic merit of the essays. There was, in fact, nothing particularly novel about any of the questions raised; the editor of the volume, John Hick, went out of his way to disclaim any novelty. But the general public chose to disbelieve him!<sup>12</sup> Let us content ourselves with a bit of reflection on the consequences resulting from the discovery that the incarnation, the assumption of human nature by the Eternal Son, the Second Person of the Eternal Trinity, and His entrance into our world and life to accomplish our redemption is not true. Among the many consequences, I will refer to just three, but they are appalling to ponder. *First*, we should have no knowledge of God. Only God can certainly

make God known. From the Lord Jesus we have learned, as Michael Ramsey put it, “God is Christ-like, and in him is no un-Christ-likeness at all.”<sup>13</sup> Why should we not turn to one of the Hindu *avatars*, someone has said. But the Word of God says, “No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, **he hath declared him**” (John 1:18). *Second*, we should have not atonement, for there would be no cross with a Son of God bearing the penalty for the sins of sinners. We thought that Paul was right when he wrote, “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself,” but if there was no incarnation, Jesus was a phantom, and His story is a myth. *Finally*, there is no hope of the resurrection of the body and of the defeat of death. We are of all men most miserable, if Jesus is not the incarnate Son who rose from the dead.<sup>14</sup> Then the noted British philosopher and agnostic Bertrand Russell would have been right in saying that belief in fairy tales is pleasant. If, however, He is the incarnate Son of God, true God of true God, when we have the knowledge of God, and an atonement that removes our sin’s eternal judgment, with a glorious hope of the resurrection of the body and life everlasting. The words of the divine Son in the inspired Scriptures, the one John Hick smugly called, “a ‘man of the universal destiny,’” cheer and gladden the hearts of the saints, “I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die” (John 11:25-26).<sup>15</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cf. his work *On Being a Christian* (1977). Criticism of his theology focused on his Christology, since in *On Being a Christian* he interpreted the ontological Christology of incarnational dogma in purely functional terms. Kermit Zarley praises Küng repeatedly in his equally-heretical work, *The Restitution of Jesus Christ* (Triangle Books, 2009), cf. p. 518.

<sup>2</sup> R. T. France, “The Worship of Jesus: A Neglected Factor in Christological Debate?,” *Christ the Lord: Studies in Christology Presented to Donald Guthrie*, ed. by Harold H. Rowdon (Intervarsity Press, 1982), p. 35.

<sup>3</sup> William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* (Baker Book House, 1973), p. 723.

<sup>4</sup> This is documented in detail in the excellent Study of Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, “Jesus’ Alleged Confession of Sin,” *The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. by Samuel G. Craig (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1950), pp. 149-85.

<sup>5</sup> James Stalker, *The Christology of Jesus, Being His Teaching concerning Himself according to the Synoptic Gospels* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1899), p. 108.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* ed. C. A. Hall (IVP, 1998). This is an excellent introduction to the Church Fathers. I highly recommend it.

<sup>7</sup> Vincent Taylor, *The Person of Christ in New Testament Teachings* (MacMillan & Company Ltd., 1958), p. 276.

<sup>8</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ*, trans. by John Vriend (Eerdmans, 1954), p. 185.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Berkouwer, p. 187.

<sup>10</sup> Warfield, pp. 61-62.

<sup>11</sup> John Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate* (The Westminster Press, 1977), p. 211. “One of many bizarre moments in *The Myth of God Incarnate*,” observes Donald MacLeod, “is the point where Hick attributes the triumph of the myth of the incarnation to the inherent conservatism of religion. A first-century Jew who believed in the enfleshment of God and in plurality within the godhead was not by any stretch of the imagination a conservative. He was a radical, taking a quantum-leap into a belief-system that contradicted his every instinct. It must have taken an immense force of fact and circumstance to produce such a revolution.” *The Person of Christ: Contours of Christian Theology* (IVP, 1998), p. 236. Kermit Zarley relies heavily on the work of Don Cupitt, one of the contributors to *The Myth of God Incarnate*.

<sup>12</sup> David F. Wells, *The Person of Christ: A Biblical and Historical Analysis of The Incarnation* (Crossway Books, 1984), p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> J. Michael Ramsey, “Jesus and Historical Criticism,” *The Truth of God Incarnate*, ed. by Michael Green (Eerdmans, 1977), p. 137.

<sup>14</sup> Marcus Borg, a member of the notorious Jesus Seminar, actually argues that even though the Resurrection of Jesus is critically important, this does not mean that Jesus actually rose physically from the dead. The fact that there was an empty tomb, he says, is totally irrelevant. Why? Because the Risen Jesus was simply a subjective phenomenological religious experience. The body or corpse of Jesus decayed. He goes on to declare, “Those experiences (then and now) have taken a variety of forms. They include dramatic forms such as visions and mystical experiences, and less dramatic forms such as a sense of the presence of Jesus – whether in prayer, worship, or the eucharist, in other people, or in the dailiness of our lives. The truth of Easter is grounded in these experiences, not in what happened (or didn’t happen) on a particular Sunday almost two thousand years ago. Marcus J. Borg and N. T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (Harper One, 2007), p. 135. Wright strongly disagrees with Borg, but still considers him a genuine Christian. The Apostle Paul would not have!

<sup>15</sup> I am once again acknowledging my debt in this series to my prof. of Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, the late Dr. S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., and his lectures on Christology.