

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series: Special Messages

Pastor/Teacher

Number:

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Who Was Jesus Christ?

The question posed is the timeless question, as fresh today as it was almost two thousand years ago. We sense its importance, even when we do not understand precisely why. To a theologian the answer is easy, at least on paper. We realize that *what He is*, is basic to *what He did*, and does, for that matter. Oscar Cullmann put it this way: “The New Testament hardly ever speaks of the person of Christ without at the same time speaking of his work.”¹ If He is truly God’s Son, then what He did has immense significance for fathoming the purposes and concerns of God for men. In other words, what He did in securing the forgiveness of sins for His people is an open door into the college of the knowledge of God. Conversely, the exalted nature of His being lends infinite credibility and value to the work of the cross by which He secured such blessing for men. It is not an idle, or groundless, claim that men sense the importance of the question. Hugh Anderson pointed out in one of his works on our Lord that even liberal theologians were so engrossed in the study of the life of biographies of the Man from Nazareth.² The Apostle John considered this *the* question of human life, and he devoted his gospel to its answer. His conclusion, as we saw so plainly in our last study was that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God, and that one might have the knowledge of God and eternal life through Him. He wrote of Jesus Christ as the revelation of God in the words, “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). In fact, John rings the changes on this theme through his work. Among the passages that stress the Son as the revealer of the Father and His glory is John 1:14, “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.” Then one thinks of the words spoken to Philip in answer to his timid request, “Lord, shew us the Father, and it sufficeth us.” With an apparent bit of disappointment Jesus replied, “Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? He that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, Shew us the Father.” Up to this point we have looked at some of the specific texts that teach that Jesus of Nazareth, insofar as one aspect of His being is concerned, is truly God. The texts are clear and plain. There is other scriptural testimony, however, that supports and elucidates the texts, giving us a combined testimony of great weight and credibility. It is to this type of testimony that we turn in the remainder of this study.

I. THE TESTIMONY OF THE MIRACLES

The miracles that Jesus Christ performed witness to His deity. It is a well-known fact that prophets and apostles performed miracles, and deity is not claimed for them. But, there is a sense in which our Lord’s miracles throw the activities of other men of God into the shade. Notice the following things about His work.

- A. First, the *impressiveness of His commands*. He speaks to the leper in response to his request for healing in words of sovereign authority, “I will, be thou clean” (Matthew 8:3). He performed the most difficult of miracles, nature miracles, saying to the raging waters of the storm on the Sea of Galilee, “Peace, be still,” and immediately a great calm came (Mark 4:39). To the daughter of the ruler of the synagogue, whose name was Jairus, it is the simple and direct, “Talitha cumi,” or “Maid, arise.” One is reminded of Genesis “Let there be light, and there was light” (Genesis 1:3). One is reminded of the stilling of the storm again, and the tremendous sense of the numinous that fell upon the men in the little skiff. Mark describes the sense of mystery in this way, “And they feared exceedingly, and said one to another, what manner of man is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (Mark 4:41). Again on the Sea of Galilee, the scene of so much of His work and ministry, after a night of fruitless toil by Peter and his partners, Jesus performed the miracle of the mighty haul of fish. When the weight of the fish became so great that the boats began to sink, there exploded within Peter the conviction that the Lord God of Israel was with him in the boat. He fell down at Jesus’ knees, crying out, “Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Luke 5:8).

II. THE TESTIMONY AS THE SUPREME REVEALER OF TRUTH

There are many sayings of our Lord in which he appears as the supreme and unique revealer of truth. The greatest of the prophets of the Old Testament preface their words with, "Thus saith the Lord," but Jesus characteristically introduces his with, "Verily I say unto you." The expression occurs thirty times in Matthew, thirteen times in Mark, six times in Luke and twenty-five times in John, who characteristically doubles the word, making it "Verily, verily." As Professor Bruce Metzger of Princeton Theological Seminary has said, this use of "verily" indicates a finality and an authority in his message that is unparalleled elsewhere. He adds, "The entire range of Jewish literature knows of no example of a scribe or rabbinical teacher prefacing his remarks with the expression, 'Verily (*amen*), I say to you . . .'"³ It is no wonder, then, that Matthew says the people who heard His Sermon on the Mount "were astonished at his doctrine: For he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (Matthew 7:28 - 29). This accounts for the officer's words on another occasion, "Never man spake like this man" (John 7:46).

III. THE TESTIMONY AS SOVEREIGN OVER MEN'S AFFAIRS

There are sayings in which the Lord lays sovereign claims upon the lives and consciences of men. "Follow me" was the daily language of Jesus. "There is nothing like it elsewhere," Arthur John Gossip contends concerning His claim to be the light of the world, "Buddha believed he had a marvelous and beneficent gospel to offer men, but for himself he claimed to be only the rediscoverer of an old and forgotten path; and urged his followers not to think of him, but to concentrate upon the teaching. Confucius, with a winsome humility, declared that as often as he walked with others three abreast he was sure to find a teacher; and asked 'How dare I lay claim to holiness or love? A man of endless craving, who never tires of teaching, I might be called, but nothing more.' Mohammed, with all his lofty claims, once, covering his head, cried out that unless God cast the cloak of his mercy over him, there was no hope for him at all. 'This he said thrice.' And indeed these mighty spirits have been in part left behind, both in teaching and in conduct; have in places become out of date and obsolete. But Jesus Christ is still the light of the world, and whoso follows him does not walk in darkness, but can see to find his way."⁴ Furthermore, woe to that man who refused the call to follow Him, for Jesus can say, "Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 20:32 - 33).

IV. THE TESTIMONY TO THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

The Scriptures make it plain that the forgiveness of sins is the prerogative of God alone. One of the most striking cases of the exercise of that power by the Lord Jesus Christ is found in Mark 2:1 - 12. It had to do with the forgiveness of sins and healing of the man with the palsy, who had been brought to Jesus on a pallet by four other concerned friends. When Jesus saw the faith of the men, He said to one who was sick of the palsy, "Son, thy sins be forgiven thee" (Mark 2:5). The scribes, sitting there and reasoning in their hearts, were very unhappy and, after affirming the truth that only God could forgive sins, they accused Him of blasphemy. Our Lord's reply to them is a model of empirical proof. One might *pretend* to forgive, of course, because forgiveness belongs to a realm *beyond the sphere of human observation*. Jesus, therefore, said that He would do something within human observation and verification, which He could not do, if He was capable of lying. God would not honor the word of a lying man. If, then, His word did take effect in the visible sphere that would prove that it had truly taken effect in the invisible world. So, He spoke to the scribes in this way, "Why reason ye these things in your hearts? Whether is it easier to say to the sick of the palsy, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and take up thy bed, and walk? But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (he saith to the sick of the palsy,) I say unto thee, Arise, and take up thy bed and go thy way into thine house" (Mark 2:8 - 11). Mark records the triumphant conclusion, "And immediately he arose, took up the bed, and went forth before them all; insomuch that they were all amazed, and glorified God, saying, We never saw it on this fashion" (v. 12). Now in response to this magnificent demonstration of power it has been said that Jesus did not really imply supernatural power in His words, for did He not subsequently empower the apostles to do the same thing? Obviously, however, the forgiveness of sins by the apostles *rested on His authority*. It was purely declaratory and ministerial in their case. But it might be said that His forgiveness was nothing more than the declaration that God had forgiven. Jesus, however, did not say this. He claimed He had power to forgive sins while He was on earth in His mediatorial ministry. And, what is conclusive, He claimed He had the power even when accused of blasphemy and might by such an explanation and defense have escaped the charge. As Stalker says, "The natural sense of His words undoubtedly is, that the authority rested in His own person."⁵

V. THE TESTIMONY OF THE RECEPTION OF WORSHIP

For the sake of time and space a brief reference to other indirect testimony to the deity of Christ is appropriate. Thus, fifth, we must note that Jesus received and accepted the worship of men and women. We noted this in our first installment in this series, in reference to John 20:28. Jesus is addressed in the absolute sense as "my God," and, as D. A. Carson comments "Jesus immediately (if implicitly) praises him for his faith."⁶ It is ultimately inconceivable that Jesus should accept such worship, if He were not in reality worthy of it. And, while scholars may debate quite legitimately the matter of the universal usage of the term, in the context of the Scriptures it cannot be doubted that it has the sense of to render homage due a deity. One sees this dramatically in the Book of Revelation. In the chapters in which the magnificent vision of the throne of God the Father and of the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Lamb of God, reaches its climax with the declaration that the Lamb has finished the work of redemption that restores world dominion to Him and His redeemed people, all heaven it seems, the four beasts, the twenty-four elders, myriads of angels, in fact, every creature in heaven, earth, and under the earth, excluding only the Father and the Spirit, proclaim the praises of the Lamb. And John concludes the account with the words, "And the four beasts said, Amen. And the four and twenty elders fell down and worshipped him that liveth for ever and ever" (cf. Rev. 5:1 - 14). Almost at the end of the book when the angel comes to the conclusion of the revelation, John is overwhelmed. He describes his response in this way, "And I John saw

these things and heard them. And when I had heard and seen, I fell down to worship before the feet of the angel which shewed me these things. Then saith he unto me, See thou do it not: for I am thy fellow servant, and of thy brethren the prophets, and of them which keep the sayings of this book: *worship God*" (22:8 - 9). Now, is it not striking that the angel tells John not to worship him, but to worship God, but in the account of the vision of chapters four and five the angels worship the Lamb! The implication is obvious. They tell John to worship only God, but they worship the Lamb.

VI. THE TESTIMONY TO VARIED DIVINE PREROGATIVES

There are many other scattered statements that testify to our Lord's deity. One is almost bewildered to read, "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:18 - 19). With such fantastic claims in every line here it is no wonder that some deny authenticity to the statement, but their exalted and magnificent assurance fit Him well.⁷ Or, what shall we make of this statement, made when Mary of Bethany had anointed His head with the "ointment of spikenard very precious," "Verily I say unto you, Wherever this gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, this also that she hath done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her" (Mark 14:9)? He assumes with divine certainty that His death is not the end of the movement! And of Matthew 28:18 - 20, in which we have such mighty claims as, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth," and "lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world"? As Stalker says of these ordinary words, "Many attempts have been made to define and confine these extra-ordinary words, but, like Samson's strength, they burst the withes of definition; and those only know what they mean who, in prayer with their fellow-Christians, have felt the personal nearness of Him, whom, having not seen, they love."⁸

CONCLUSION: We come again to that which we began. John the Apostle makes the profound and prodigious claim that the knowledge of Jesus the Messiah is the knowledge of God (cf. John 1:14, 18; 8:19; 14:9). The only begotten Son, eternally resting upon the bosom of the Father in closest communion, John says, "has made Him known." Only God can make God known. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, in custody on his way to martyrdom in Rome just a few years after John's Gospel was written, wrote of Christ as the Word "which came forth out of silence."⁹ The idea originated in Judaism, being linked with Genesis 1:3, where we read, "And God said, Let there be light; and there was light." The rabbis asked, "What was there before God spoke?" Their answer was, "God's silence." Silence became a token of God's inexpressible majesty. Even in the Hellenistic world silence became a symbol of the highest deity. There is even a prayer to "Silence" in a fourth century papyrus, "Silence, Silence, Silence . . . take me under thy wings, Silence." In the ancient world God is "Silence," hidden, speechless, and distant. Into that world the message of the Lord and His apostles rang out. God is not silent. He has spoken in a divine Son, "whom He appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the world; Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Hebrews 1:2 - 3). Come to Him, God's supreme Word to us, and rest in His atoning death for the forgiveness of sins!¹⁰

ENDNOTES

¹ Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of The New Testament* (The Westminster Press, 1963), p. 3.

² Hugh Anderson, ed. *Jesus: Great Lives Observed* (Prentice Hall, 1967), p. 16.

³ Bruce Manning Metzger, *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth, and Content* (Abingdon Press, 1965), p. 156.

⁴ Arthur John Gossip, "The Gospel according to St. John," *The Interpreter's Bible* (Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1952), VIII, 594 - 95.

⁵ James Stalker, *The Christology of Jesus, Being His Teaching concerning Himself according to the Synoptic Gospels* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1899), pp. 85 - 123.

⁶ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Eerdmans, 1991), p. 658.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁸ Stalker, p. 120.

⁹ J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers* (rpt. Baker, 1973), p. 70.

¹⁰ 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.