

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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<b>Series:</b>	<b>Scripture Memory</b>		Pastor/Teacher
<b>Number:</b>	<b>9</b>		Gary L.W. Johnson
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### OUR GREAT GOD AND SAVIOUR

One of the earliest and most prominent church Fathers was Ignatius of Antioch (dates approximately 98 AD – 117 AD). He stands directly in the shadow of the Apostle Paul, especially in his Christology. The letters of Ignatius emphasize the deity of Christ, explicitly referring to Jesus as God more than a dozen times. Here are just a few of his statements: “for our God, Jesus the Christ, was conceived by Mary” (Eph. 18:2); “love for Jesus Christ, our God” (Rom. proem.); “permit me to be an imitator of the passion of my God” (Rom. 6:3); “O give glory to Jesus Christ, the God who granted you such wisdom” (Smyr. 1:1). In the spurious fourth *Oration against the Arians*,<sup>1</sup> Pseudo-Athanasius inveighs principally against the Marcellians in a treatise that begins, “the Word is God from God” and closes “so then he himself is God the Word. So Christ is the God-man, born of Mary.”<sup>2</sup> H. P. Liddon, in his Bampton lectures on the divinity of Christ, said that Ignatius was representative of all the Apostolic Fathers in asserting “in strong and explicit language, the belief of the Church that Christ is God.”<sup>3</sup> When we turn to the writings of the Apostle Paul, we find ample evidence for drawing the same conclusion.

#### I. The Testimony of Paul

It is clear that Paul thought that Jesus was God. We look at three texts, although there are many other references that might be turned up.

- (1) First, there is the statement in the great “Kenosis” passage (from Greek *kenos*, “empty”). A Christological term that refers to the self-limitation of Christ in the incarnation, “but made himself nothing [lit., emptied himself], taking the very nature of a servant” (Phil. 2:7), which gives important insight into the union of the two natures in the one person, or the hypostatic union, to use the common theological term. There, Paul says that Jesus was “in the form of God” (Phil. 2:6). The term *form* refers to the unchangeable essential nature of a thing. If one says that a person is in the form of man, then what is meant is that he has the essential nature of manhood. A robin, a sparrow, a mockingbird, and a woodpecker have the same form; they are all birds. They have different outward characteristics (the Greeks had another word to express these things), but they each have the same form. Thus, if Jesus is “in the form of God,” then He has all the essential attributes of deity, or all those characterizing qualities that make God, God. He who is “in the form of God” is God. What Paul says in the paragraph is that Jesus did not surrender His divine attributes, but the voluntary use of them. He surrendered the glories of deity, the prerogatives of deity, but not the deity itself. The reasons for the laying aside of what Milton called “the blaze of majesty” lie in the necessity of performing the Messianic mediatorial work in the power of the Holy Spirit as the God-man. It was a necessary part of His humiliation.
- (2) Second, another of Paul’s texts that indicate that he thought of Christ as God is Titus 2:13, where we read of the believer’s hope, and “the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ.” This rendering of the King James Version obscures the sense of the

Greek text, but it is caught clearly in the New International Version, “while we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.” That is as clear and definite as it can be put. Bruce Metzger long ago wrote an excellent article on this subject and pointed out, “In Titus 2:13 it reads, ‘We wait for the happy hope and glorious manifestation of the great God and of our Savior Christ Jesus.’ This rendering, by separating ‘the great God’ from ‘our Savior Christ Jesus,’ overlooks a principle of Greek grammar which was detected and formulated in a rule by Granville Sharp in 1798. This rule, in brief, is that when the copulative *kai* connects two nouns of the same case, if the article precedes the first noun and is not repeated before the second noun, the latter always refers to the same person that is expressed or described by the first noun. This verse in Titus, therefore, must be translated, as in fact the Revised Standard Version (1952) renders it, ‘Awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.’ In support of this translation, there may be quoted such eminent grammarians of the Greek New Testament as P. W. Schmiedel, J. H. Moulton, A. T. Robertson, and Blass-Debrunner. All of these scholars concur in the judgment that only one person is referred to in Titus 2:13 and that therefore it must be rendered, ‘Our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.’”<sup>4</sup>

- (3) Romans 9:5 has been the focus of much debate primarily over the question of punctuation. The Revised Standard Version reads, “and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ. God who is over all be blessed for ever. Amen.” The English Standard Version, which is actually a revision of the RSV, reads very differently: “from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.” In the margin, the RSV has “Christ, who is God over all, blessed for ever.” It will be seen that the difference between these two renderings, which makes a significant difference for our present discussion, results from a change of punctuation. But since the ancient Greek MSS did not carry any punctuation marks, it is clear that the problem of the choice of readings cannot be resolved on such grounds. Several considerations favour the RSV margin (which the NIV and ESV has printed in the text). A concluding doxology would normally have placed the word “blessed” (*EULOGETOS*) at the beginning and not at the end, and this weighs against the first rendering. The second point is that Paul’s normal practice in a doxology is to relate it to the person named immediately before (*cf.* Rom. 1:25), but in this case God (the Father) is not mentioned in the preceding context. The third reason is that the participle (*ON*) would be superfluous if the concluding words are a doxology to God (the Father), but not if they refer to the antecedent Christ. Certainly these grammatical reasons strongly favour the ascription of Godhead to Christ.<sup>5</sup>

There are other passages to which we might turn, such as Hebrews 1:8 and 2 Peter 1:1, in both of which the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ is plainly affirmed. Anytime someone sits in judgment on Christ, they are in big trouble. Leo Tolstoy, the noted Russian novelist, is a prime example. Many Christians have naively assumed he was a believer because of his much publicized admiration of the Sermon on the Mount and the elevated sentiments in such stories as *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, and *Where Love Is, There God Is Also*. In actuality, Tolstoy was no Christian at all, for he actually felt himself to be Christ’s older brother and thus assumed he could judge the appropriateness of Christ’s actions. Tolstoy saw himself as part of a kind of elite apostolic succession of minds that included Moses, Isaiah, Confucius, Socrates, and others who thought and spoke sincerely on the meaning of life. As such, he declared that to call Christ God or to pray to him was heresy and blasphemy.<sup>6</sup> On the contrary, it is shocking heresy to deny it. In the Nicene Creed, accepted as Christian doctrine by Christian churches, the church has confessed its faith “in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only begotten, that is, *From the substance of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father*, through whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth, who for us and for our salvation came

down and became incarnate, becoming man, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended to the heavens, will come to judge the living and dead.”<sup>7</sup>

**Summary.** The evidence of the Scriptures is that the Son possesses *undiminished deity*. Otherwise, we can only conclude with C. S. Lewis, “I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: ‘I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.’ That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a mad man or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”<sup>8</sup> Those who have believed in Him and enjoy the salvation He gives have never been in doubt over this trilemma. There is a marvelous statement from P. T. Forsyth that bears repeating. “Is it not equally true,” he wrote, “that he thought of himself as in a category distinct from other men, whether we regard his relation to God or to the world? *Where he came salvation came* – as to Zacchaeus by his very presence. *He stood between men and God, not with men before God.* A word spoken against him was comparable, however different, to a sin against God’s Holy Spirit. For both were against God. They were not like sins against men. That is to say, he has to make his historic personality parallel with the Holy Spirit before he can set up the contrast, which is only effectual between beings *ejusdem generic*. *He was greater than the temple, he said* – as no prophet could be. In the parable of the vineyard he is the only son, the beloved, distinct from the messengers besides. *He never prays with his disciples, much as he prays for them; and the Lord’s Prayer was given by him but not used by him.* There is a line between him and them, delicate but firm, ‘*often as fine as a hair but always as hard as a diamond.*’”<sup>9</sup> So listen once more to Ignatius of Antioch, who wrote just after the New Testament was concluded and spoke of “one Physician, who is both flesh and spirit, born yet not born, who is God and man,” (Eph. 7:2)<sup>10</sup> and to Charles Wesley, who taught us to sing:

“Amazing Love! how can it be  
That Thou, MY GOD, shouldst die for me?”

We preach Him as Thomas confessed Him, “my Lord and my God,” (John 20:28) unique, supreme, and sufficient.

**CONCLUSION:** W. G. T. Shedd, one of the most accomplished theologians that America has ever produced, helpfully observed, “The construction of the doctrine of the trinity started not so much from a consideration of the three Persons, as from a belief in the deity of one of them, namely the Son. This was the root of the most speculative dogma in the Christian system. The highly metaphysical doctrine of the trinity, as Guericke remarks, ‘had its origin, primarily, in a *living belief*; namely, in the practical faith and feeling of the primitive Christian that Christ is the co-equal Son of God.’ For if there is any fact in history that is indisputable, it is that the Apostolic and Primitive Church *worshipped* Jesus Christ. This was the distinctive characteristic of the adherents of the new religion. Pliny’s testimony is well known, that the Christians as a sect were accustomed to meet before day-break, and sing a responsive hymn (*Carmen dicere secum invicem*) to Christ, as to God (*Christo quasi Deo*). The earliest liturgies are full of adoration towards the sacred Three, and particularly towards the second and middle Person. The liturgy of the Church of Alexandria, which in the opinion of Bunsen was adopted about the year 200, and the ground plan of which dates back to the year 150, teaches the ‘People’ to respond: ‘One alone is holy, the Father; One alone is holy, the Son; One alone is holy, the Spirit.’ The religious experience of the Primitive Church was marked by joy at the finished work of redemption; and this joy was accompanied with profound and thankful adoration towards its Author. If regard be had to the emotional utterances and invocations of the first generations of Christians, there is full as much evidence for the deity of the Son as of the Father. The

religious feeling in all its varieties terminated full as much upon the second Person of the trinity, as upon the first, in that early period in the history of Christianity that was nearest to the living presence and teachings of its Founder. The incarnation of the Logos – God becoming man – is the great dogmatic idea of the first Christian centuries, and shapes the whole thinking and experience of the Church.”<sup>11</sup> So we close with the challenge, “What think YE of Christ?” Echoing the words of the Roman procurator, we add, “What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ?” (Matt. 27:22). The two questions hound and haunt us until we respond.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup>Arianism taught that the Son of God was not eternal and, like modern day Jehovah’s Witnesses, denied the doctrine of the Trinity. Arianism was condemned at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers* (rpt. Baker, 1973), pp. 55-90.

<sup>3</sup>H. P. Liddon, *The Divinity of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1978) p. 419.

<sup>4</sup>Bruce Metzger, “The Jehovah’s Witnesses and Jesus Christ: A Biblical and Theological Appraisal,” *Theology Today* (10/1 April, 1953) p. 79. See also the equally superb discussion by M. J. Harris, “Titus 2:13 and the Deity of Christ” in *Pauline Studies* eds. D. A. Hagner and M. J. Harris (Eerdmans, 1980), p. 267.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. D. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (IVP, 1981), p. 339.

<sup>6</sup>As cited in R. K. Hughes, *Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul* (Crossways, 1993), p. 63.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (Longmans, 1960), pp. 215-16.

<sup>8</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (McMillian, 1943), p. 55.

<sup>9</sup>P. T. Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ* (Eerdmans, n.d.), pp. 105-6.

<sup>10</sup>Lightfoot, *op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup>W. G. T. Shedd, *History of Doctrine I* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1978) p. 263.