

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Deity of Christ		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	6		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	John 1:1-18; 20:28; 1 John 5:20		
Date:	July 1, 2018 (a.m.)		

THE WITNESS OF JOHN (Part I)

Kermit Zarley claims that John's writings nowhere teach that Jesus is God. In his treatment of John 20:28 and Thomas' confession, he acknowledges that this passage is the most formidable text supporting the traditional view that Jesus is God, but he then proceeds to offer up a very strange interpretation, that Thomas did address Jesus as Lord, but when he used the word God, he was only referring to God the Father, who was pleased to reveal Himself in Christ!¹ In other words, Jesus was simply a mere man who God worked through. This hardly harmonizes with John's overall theology as we shall see.

I. *The Gospel of John.* The late New Testament scholar Donald Guthrie noted that: "There are two main passages which need examination, the Johannine prologue and John 20:28. We have already discussed in some detail the contribution of the Logos concept towards an understanding of the person of Christ (pp. 327ff.). We noted then the words of John 1:1, which affirm of the Logos that he was not only with God but was God (*Theos ēn ho logos*). There is no denying the force of the predicate which shows that John meant to say that God was the Word, with the emphasis falling on the word for God and not simply that the Word was divine. The absence of the article shows unquestionably that *Theos* is a predicate and not an adjective. The statement therefore is an important evidence in the presentation of Jesus as God. This is further supported by the comment in John 1:18, which we have also previously discussed (p. 313) and found reason to support the reading *monogenēs Theos* (only-begotten God; or, better, only God). This is certainly the more difficult reading, but for that reason alone is more likely to be authentic. It is striking testimony to the firm conviction of the evangelist that the man Jesus about whom he writes his gospel is none other than God. It is to be noted further that in both these statements in the prologue John also draws a distinction between Jesus and God. It is not without some significance that this gospel which begins with so strong an affirmation that Jesus is God should end with one of the disciples of Jesus confessing the same truth. The words of Thomas, 'My Lord and my God!' (Jn. 20:28) were almost certainly addressed to Christ. There is no reason for denying the possibility that Thomas uttered these words, but even if, as some suppose, the confession is the evangelist's own composition, it is still a strong testimony to John's belief that Jesus is God. There are insufficient grounds for alleging that 'Jesus is Lord' must have preceded 'Jesus is God' by such an interval that both could not have formed one confession. Indeed both were truths expressed in familiar OT terminology for God."² Along similar lines, Herman Ridderbos, the highly-acclaimed Dutch scholar, wrote that: "The 'absolute' description of the Word that was with God and was God (1:1) is explained, at the deepest level, by the absoluteness of the historic self-disclosure of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. It is essentially nothing other than that which, at the close of the Gospel, brings the unbelieving Thomas to confess 'my Lord and my God' as the ultimate human response in the confrontation with the glory of

God in the coming, work, and, finally, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In that sense, therefore, one can say that the first utterance of the prologue is not different from the last word of the gospel story. But the prologue places that glory where it belongs and in light of which alone it can be understood. And that place is not the great pantheon of gods and demigods of pagan mythology nor the conceptual teaching of philosophical cosmology in which the ‘crossings’ of God to the cosmos were expressed, but – as the Evangelist himself says in so many words – the knowledge of that God of whom Israel had always known as the God of the beginning.”³

John’s witness is far more comprehensive than just these two passages. H. P. Liddon, in his classic work on the divinity of Christ, declared: “In St. John’s Gospel the Personality of Christ makes Itself felt as Eternal and Divine at wellnigh every step of the narrative. Thus even the Forerunner describes a Being Who appearing later in time has had an earlier existence (John 1:15); and Who, while coming from above, is yet ‘above all’ (John 3:31). Each discourse, each miracle, nay, each separate word and act, is a fresh ray of glory streaming forth from the Person of the Word through the veil of His assumed Humanity. The miracles of the Word Incarnate are frequently called His works (John 5:36; 7:21; 10:25, 32, 38; 14:11; 15:23). The Evangelist means to imply that ‘the wonderful is only the natural form of working for Him in Whom all the fulness of God dwells.’ Christ’s Divine Nature must of necessity bring forth works greater than the works of man. The Incarnation is the one great wonder; other miracles follow as a matter of course. The real marvel would be if the Incarnate Being should work no miracles; as it is, they are the natural results of His presence among men, rather than its higher manifestation. His true glory is not perceived except by those who gaze at it with a meditative and reverent intentness. The Word Incarnate is ever conscious of His sublime relationship to the Father. He knows whence He is (John 8:14). He refers not unfrequently to His pre-existent Life (John 3:13; 6:62; 8:58; 16:28; 17:5). He sees into the deepest purposes of the human hearts around Him (John 2:24; 4:17; 5:58; 16:28; 17:5). He has a perfect knowledge of all that concerns God ((John 8:55; 10:15). His works are simply the works of God (John 9:4; 10:37; 14:10). To believe in the Father is to believe in Him. To have seen Him is to have seen the Father. To reject and hate Him is to reject and hate the Father. He demands at the hands of men the same tribute of affection and submission as that which they owe to the Person of the Father.”⁴

II. *The Epistles of John.* St. John’s picture of Christ’s work in this first Epistle, and especially his pointed and earnest opposition to the specific heresy of Cerinthus, leads us up to the culminating statement that Jesus Himself is the true God and the Eternal Life (1 John 5:20). Throughout this Epistle the Apostle has been writing to those ‘who believe on the Name of the Son of God,’ that is to say, on the Divine Nature of Jesus, which the verbal symbol guards and suggests. Throughout this Epistle St. John’s object has been to convince believers that by that faith they had the Eternal Life, and to force them to be true to It (1 John 5:13).”⁵ In commenting on 1 John 5:20, the great Anglican theologian of the eighteenth century Daniel Waterland observed: “*True God* is another *divine title* belonging to the Son of God. ‘We are in him that is true, even in (or by) his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life,’ 1 John v. 20. We have sufficient reason to believe that God the Son is here called ‘true God,’ and ‘eternal life.’ It is on all hands confessed that ‘eternal life,’ in the style of St. John (see 1 John i. 2.), is an epithet appropriate to the *Son*, and is to be understood of him in this very passage. And thus a late Arian writer interprets the last words. ‘This is the *true God*, even the *Father*; and this is the *way* that leads to him, even *Jesus Christ*, who is the *way*, the *truth*, and the *life*,’ understanding *eternal life* as another name for, or as appropriate to, the person of *Jesus Christ*. But it is manifest that the pronoun *this (houtos)* is the subject of both the predicates, *true God* and *eternal life*. To make good construction of it the other way, the

sentence should have run, *This (houtos) is the true God, and that other (ekeinos) is eternal life*. But the words are, ‘This (person, *houtos*) is the true God (*ho alēthinos Theos*) and eternal life’ (*kai en zōei aiōnios*). There is no other subject of the latter predicate besides the *houtos, this*, going before. If it be said that the particle *ei* may stand for *autēi*, and so the sense be, *This is the way*, pointing as it were to *Jesus Christ* before mentioned; yet so the construction is very harsh and unnatural: besides that the particle *ei* is observed to have been wanting in the Alexandrian and several other manuscripts. Our interpretation therefore agrees much better than the other with the words following after *houtos, this*. And I must observe further, that it agrees also better with the words going before it: ‘We are in him that is true, even *in* (or even *by*) his Son Jesus Christ.’ Then follows immediately *houtos, this*, this Person, immediately before mentioned, viz. *Jesus Christ*. For, allowing that a pronoun may sometimes refer to a remote antecedent, yet is it not so unusual nor so natural; neither should it be presumed to do so, without a manifest necessity.”⁶ (to be continued)

ENDNOTES

¹ Kermit Zarley, *The Restitution of Jesus Christ* (Triangle Books, 2008), p. 396-400.

² Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (IVP, 1981), p. 338.

³ Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1991), p. 35.

⁴ H. P. Liddon, *The Divinity of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1978), p. 237-239.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

⁶ *The Works of Daniel Waterland II* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1756), p. 130. The Rev. Dr. Daniel Waterland (1683-1740) was educated at Cambridge University. In 1713 he became Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge. In 1722 he became Chancellor of York, and he became Archdeacon of Middlesex in 1730. He is today most remembered for his printed disputes with Samuel Clarke and other subordinationists (“Arians”), in defense of what many including Waterland considered trinitarian orthodoxy, including the “Athanasian” Creed.