

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE CHRIST, GOD OVER ALL (Part I)

The doctrine of the deity of Christ, as Warfield once observed, constituted “three specific convictions on the part of the Christian community, to which they give endlessly repeated and endlessly varied expressions. Christ is the Messiah; Christ is our Redeemer; Christ is God: these are the great asseverations which are especially embodied in them. All three are already summed up in the angelic announcement which was made to the shepherds at His birth: ‘I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all the people: for there is born to you this day in the city of David the Saviour, who is Christ the Lord’ (Luke 2). The whole New Testament may be said to be an exposition and enforcement of that announcement: and in the course of this exposition and enforcement, it teaches us many things. Above all, it places beyond dispute the main fact with which we have now to deal, this fact, to wit, that the whole Christian community, and that from the very beginning, was firmly convinced that Jesus Christ was God manifested in the flesh.”¹ Recently however, the noted new Perspective on Paul advocate, the bishop of Durham, N. T. Wright, expressed reservations about this, saying that our Western culture has imposed on the word “God” a concept that does not reflect the one the Biblical writers had in mind. Here is how he put it. “Let me be clear, also, what I am *not* saying. I do not think Jesus ‘knew he was God’ in the same sense that one knows one is hungry or thirsty, tall or short. It was not a mathematical knowledge, like knowing that two and two make four; nor was it straightforwardly observational knowledge, like knowing that there is a bird on the fence outside my room because I can see and hear it. It was more like the knowledge that I have that I am loved by my family and closest friends; like the knowledge that I have that sunrise over the sea is awesome and beautiful; like the knowledge of the musician not only of what the composer intended but of how precisely to perform the piece in exactly that way -- a knowledge most securely possessed, of course, when the performer is also the composer. It was, in short, the knowledge that characterizes *vocation*.”² This is a troubling statement, in that it appears to imply that Jesus and the Apostolic Church had an “adoptionistic” understanding of the Person of Christ.³ Kermit Zarley, who embraces the term *Evangelical* but adopts an openly Socinian view of Christ (he did not pre-exist, he was not God incarnate – he simply was a mere man who God favored), Zarley reluctantly admits that the vast majority of New Testament scholars affirm that Romans 9:5 does in fact teach that Jesus is God – but since there are some, especially liberal scholars, who do not, then “this grammatically ambiguous passage should not be used as a proof text to support the traditional belief that Jesus Christ is God.”⁴

I am of the opinion that when the Apostle Paul wrote to the Church at Rome, he was well aware of the background out of which the converts had come -- both Jew and Gentile -- and that both groups could fully understand what he was saying by calling Christ “God.” As he begins his “Christian philosophy of history” (as Rom. 9-11 has been called), Paul solemnly affirms his truthfulness (v. 1) when he declares that he has intense sorrow and perpetual anguish at the failure of the majority of his fellow Jews to embrace the salvation found in Christ (v. 2). If it were possible and permissible to do so, he would wish (*ēuchomēn*, to the point of wishing) that he himself were cursed and therefore cut off from Christ if that would bring about the salvation of his fellow countrymen (v. 3). To explain why his

grief at general Jewish unbelief was so intense, Paul lists the incomparable privileges and distinctive advantages that belonged to the Jewish race, his kinsfolk by blood and nationality (vv. 4-5). After enumerating various impersonal blessings that belong to the Israelites (v. 4), he cites two personal blessings, the second representing their consummate privilege: "To them belong the patriarchs, and from their ranks came the Messiah as far as human descent is concerned" (v. 5a).⁵

I. PAUL'S RATIONALE FOR HIS ANGUISH

- A. *The Adoption* (Rom. 9:4). In seeking to show the reason for his grief and his compassionate desire that Israel be saved, the apostle laments their privileges and lost opportunities. His description of Israel's favored lost includes eight great blessings, the first of which is the adoption. He refers to the fact that God called Israel His firstborn son (cf. Exodus. 4:22; Deut. 32:18). In effect, he speaks of them as "the chosen people." Their failure seems more terrible in the light of what God had done for them.
- B. *The Glory* (Rom. 9:4). The second of the great blessings is "the glory," an expression that refers to the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire, by which God miraculously guided the nation through the wilderness to the promised land. What a blessing to have His daily, moment-by-moment guidance! From Sinai to Bethlehem His hand was upon them, and yet they have now turned from Him.
- C. *The Covenants* (Rom. 9:4). The covenants is an expression that includes both the conditional and the unconditional covenants of the Old Testament, but in the light of the specific mention of the giving of the law, it is likely that the stress of the words lies upon the unconditional ones, that is, the Abrahamic, the Davidic, and the New Covenant. Those covenants are unconditional in the sense that God has determined to bless the recipients of the covenantal blessings on the basis of His sovereign good pleasure. They, therefore, shall be fulfilled in His time surely and certainly. The Abrahamic Covenant, the fountainhead of the plan, is marked out by a special sacrificial inauguration of it. The passing of the smoking furnace and the burning lamp, the symbol of the presence of God, through the pieces of the sacrificial animals, with Abraham not being invited to follow, stressed the fact that God was undertaking to fulfill the covenant Himself. It did not depend upon man's contribution, except insofar as there was presupposed the penitence and faith of the human parties to the covenant. That faith, however; is given by God, so that He alone determines the completion of the stipulations of the covenant. We should never confuse the conditionality of the covenants with the promises of God. Mike Horton makes this very pertinent observation, "we should avoid two errors that lead ultimately to the same confusion. On one hand, we must resist concluding that the covenant concept is inherently conditioned upon personal performance and, on the other, that it is inherently gracious in character. In both cases, we are making *a priori* judgments about what a covenant can and cannot be rather than attending to the diverse ways in which the word is used in the Scriptures. *Covenant* in both Old and New Testaments, so we have argued, is a broad term encompassing a variety of arrangements—most notably, conditional covenants of law and unconditional covenants of promise. Already in the Old Testament itself there are these two covenant types: suzerainty and royal grant, the latter fitting perfectly the New Testament concept of *diatheke* or 'last will and testament.' Just as a great king bestows a gift on a loyal vassal in view of noteworthy service, the New Testament teaches that believers become coheirs with Christ, the Servant of Yahweh, inheriting by grace that which he has inherited by personal obedience. His death inaugurates our receipt of that inheritance just as the death of a testator puts the will into effect and disposes of the estate. So the New Testament does not jettison the Old Testament concept of covenant, but rather identifies its new covenant with the royal grant, a promissory oath made to Noah, Abraham, and David."⁶

- D. ***The Promises*** (Rom. 9:4). By the promises Paul refers to what Reformed theologians call the Covenant of Grace. In reality he points to the Messianic promises, that is, the promises of the coming Messiah and their application to the elect of God. The Messianic promises have their beginning in the Protevangelium of Genesis 3:15 and encompass all of the promise program of the Old Testament, including the promises of the Great Prophet, the Priest after the order of Melchizedek, and the promises of the King to come. The ministry of Isaiah's great Suffering Servant of Jehovah would also be in the mind of the apostle. In fact, the term includes all the redemptive promises; ultimately, those that begin in Genesis and those that conclude the story in Revelation.
- E. ***The Fathers*** (Rom. 9:5). Not the least of the blessings of the nation are those traditions seen in the life of the fathers of the faith, men such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses. In fact, one might include here all of those mentioned in the Westminster Abbey of Faith, Hebrews 11:1 – 12:2.
- F. ***The Messiah*** (Rom. 9:5). And, finally, there is the Messiah, related to them according to the flesh, but also "God over all, blessed forever."

The last words of verse five have been debated for ages by biblical students. Liberal theologians have generally contended for a punctuation of the original text that attributes deity to "God," not to the Messiah. Conservatives have generally taken the words, "who is over all, God blessed forever," to refer to Christ. For example, the Revised Standard Version has translated verse five in this way, "to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ. God who is over all be blessed forever. Amen." This rendering refers the term "God" to the Father, and not to the Messiah. The New International Version has, "Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen." This rendering attributes deity to Christ.⁷ H. P. Liddon in his classic work declares, "Certainly St. Paul used the terms 'form of God,' 'image of God,' when speaking of the Divinity of Jesus Christ. But these terms do not imply that Christ's Divinity only resembles or is analogous to the Divinity of the Father. They do not mean that, as Man, He represents the Divine Perfections in an inferior and partial manner to our finite intelligence which is incapable of raising itself sufficiently to contemplate the transcendent reality. They are necessary in order to define the personal distinction which exists between the Divine Son and the Eternal Father. Certainly it is no mere human being or seraph Whom St. Paul describes as being 'over all, God blessed forever.' You remind me that these words are referred by some modern scholars to the Eternal Father. Certainly they are: but on what grounds? Of scholarship? What then is St. Paul's general purpose when he uses these words? He has just been enumerating those eight privileges of the race of Israel, the thought of which kindled in his true Jewish heart the generous and passionate desire to be made even anathema for his rejected countrymen. To these privileges he subjoins a climax. The Israelites were they, from whom the Christ according to flesh; the One being over all God blessed unto the ages. It was from the blood of Israel that the true Christ had sprung, so far as His Human Nature was concerned; but Christ's Israelitic descent is, in the Apostle's eyes, so consummate a glory for Israel, because Christ is much more than one of the sons of men: because by reason of His Higher Pre-existent Nature He is 'over all, God blessed forever.' This is the natural sense of the passage."⁸

CONCLUSION: As early as 1998, *Christianity Today* heralded NT Wright as one of their top five Evangelical scholars. But his novel views on justification and his idiosyncratic take on Jesus as "God" has raised a few eyebrows about whether or not Wright is "Evangelical."⁹ In fact, Wright intentionally glosses over the classical approaches to establish the deity of Christ from the four Gospels and resorts to a linguistic sleight of hand in his handling of the term "God." Wright's repackaging of the doctrine is not very reassuring and ends up painting a picture of Christ that the Apostolic Church (especially the Apostle Paul), would not recognize.

ENDNOTES

¹ B. B. Warfield, *The Lord of Glory: A Study of The Designations of Our Lord in The New Testament with Especial Reference to His Deity* (rpt. Baker, 1974), p. 298.

² N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (IVP, 1999), p. 121. He goes on to say, “Western orthodoxy, not least within what calls itself ‘evangelicalism,’ has had for too long an overly lofty and detached view of God. It has always tended to approach the Christological question by assuming this view of God and then by fitting Jesus into it. Hardly surprisingly, the result has been a Docetic Jesus. This in turn generated the protest of the eighteenth century (‘Jesus can’t have been like that, therefore the whole thing is based on a mistake’) and of much subsequent historical scholarship, not least because of the social and cultural arrangements that the combination of semi-Deism and Docetism generated and sustained. That combination remains powerful, not least in parts of my own church, and it still needs a powerful challenge. My proposal is not that we know what the word *god* means and manage somehow to fit Jesus into that. Instead, I suggest that we think historically about a young Jew possessed of a desperately risky, indeed apparently crazy, vocation, riding into Jerusalem in tears, denouncing the Temple and dying on a Roman cross – and that we somehow allow our meaning for the word *god* to be recentered around that point. Let me recapitulate and develop something I said in the opening chapter of this book. After twenty years of serious historical-Jesus study I still say the Christian creeds *ex animo*, but I now mean something very different by them, not least by the word *God* itself” (p. 123). This is more than a little astounding. Bishop Wright, you will remember, claimed that the Reformers misunderstood the Apostle Paul on Justification. Now he informs us the entire Christian Church has misread the Bible when it comes to understanding the *real* meaning of Jesus’ deity. We really are not at liberty to decide that the language of the Christian Creeds can be harnessed to convey a meaning other than the one they intended, but Wright has done something very similar with the word *justification* as it is used in our Reformed Confessions.

³ “Adoptionism is a reference to an early church heresy that is usually referred to as ‘Dynamic Monarchianism,’ which taught that Jesus exercised the function or role (very similar to Wright’s use of the word ‘vocation’) of divine sovereignty and Sonship. This was something he came slowly but surely to realize. This kind of ‘functional Christology’ is fatal for two reasons: First, it illegitimizes the worship of Jesus. He cannot on such premises be the object of our faith or the one for whom we renounce all or the one to whom we pray or the one to whom we sing hymns and offer doxologies. He cannot be our *Kyrios* and we cannot be his *douloi*. At the very most we can only worship God through him. To worship him himself would be idolatry. Secondly, adoptionism means that it is not God himself who comes towards us in Jesus Christ, taking our nature, sharing our pain and bearing our sins. It is at best only a simulacrum of the divine. The great invitation, ‘Come to me, all who are heavy laden!’ would no longer be the voice of the divine; and union with Christ would no longer mean union with God (assuming we could attach any meaning at all to the notion of *en Christō* in a thought-world where Christ has no post-existence). We could not even see Christ as in any meaningful sense the revelation of God, since denial of his eternal deity means that ‘we could not think of god as being in himself what he appears to be in his manifestation toward us in Jesus Christ.’” Cf. Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ: Contours of Christian Theology* (IVP, 1998), p. 245.

⁴ K. Zarley, *The Restitution of Jesus Christ* (Triangle, 2008), p. 439.

⁵ cf. Murray J. Harris, *Jesus As God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Baker, 1992), p. 145.

⁶ M. S. Horton, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* (Baker, 2006), p. 67. I highly recommend this book.

⁷ This analysis of this passage is taken from S. Lewis Johnson’s Class Lectures on Romans.

⁸ H. P. Liddon, *The Divinity of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1978), p. 316.

⁹ Noted Evangelical Anglican scholar Gerald Bray, in an editorial for *The Churchman* (2005, issue 119/3) scolded Wright for his position on women Bishops and concluded that given his stance on this and other issues, Wright was not an Evangelical.