

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Deity of Christ		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	9		Gary L.W. Johnson
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THE CHRIST, GOD OVER ALL (Part II)

Isaac Watts (1674-1748) has been called the father of English hymnody. Some of his hymns would include: Joy to the World (arranged by Lowell Mason to an older melody originating from Handel); Come ye that love the Lord (often sung with the chorus [and titled] “We’re marching to Zion”); O God, Our Help in Ages Past; When I Survey the Wondrous Cross; Alas! and did my Saviour Bleed. Douglas Bond, writing for Ligonier Ministries (May 26, 2014), contends that Watts was a Calvinist. He noted: “Hymnologist Albert Bailey reluctantly admitted, ‘Watts’ hymns are rhymed theology, and the theology is derived from John Calvin, who in turn got his basic ideas from Augustine and Paul.’ Bailey, a theological liberal, despised the Calvinism of Nonconformists, Puritans, and Presbyterians: ‘This religion is nothing short of dreadful. It outrages our sense of justice, contradicts our reason, makes God a monster, Christ a play-actor in the tragedy of human history, and robs man of his freedom without which life is impossible.’ Yet he seemed, nevertheless, to have been enamored with Watts as a hymn writer, and went so far as to claim that Watts ‘admirably’ fulfills Milton’s description of the finest poetry as ‘simple, sensual, and passionate.’ At last, theological skeptic that he was, Bailey was forced to conclude that with Watts, ‘Even the cold logic of Calvinism catches fire.’”¹ Watts did claim to be a Calvinist, but his brand of Calvinism was modified by his rationalistic attempt to explain what he perceived to be the alleged harshness in Calvinism. “Watts wrote about this in some detail in his book, *Ruin and Recovery*. But *Ruin and Recovery* is an interesting treatise in other respects. When Watts discusses the ‘recovery’ of mankind, he falls into some peculiar beliefs. In explaining some of the Calvinistic dogmas through the light of reason, he succeeds in explaining them away. Take, for example, his explication of the doctrine of election. It is logical, he feels, that God should guarantee through election that a certain number be saved to partake of His grace; but on the other hand, there is no reason ‘why the strictest Calvinist should be angry, that the all sufficient merit of Christ should overflow so far in its influence, as to provide a conditional salvation for all mankind, since the elect of God have that certain and absolute salvation which they contend for, secured to them by the same merit . . .’ Watts thus redefined the Calvinist doctrine of election to include the Arminian doctrine of an unlimited atonement providing a conditional salvation for all. He then goes on to further redefine Calvinism to make it more acceptable to Arminians and rationalists.”² More disturbing is Watts’ doctrine of Christ. “In The Glory of Christ as God-Man, Dr. Watts hazarded the opinion that ‘Michael is Jesus Christ, because he is called . . . the first of the princes, that is, the prime archangel.’ Watts ‘confirms this sentiment’ that Christ and Michael are the same beings from Revelation 12:7. He continues, ‘Perhaps this Michael, that is Christ the King of the Jews, is the only archangel, or prince and head of all angels.’ A little later he ventures the opinion that ‘Jesus Christ was that angel who generally appeared in ancient times to the patriarchs and to the Jews.’ According to Watts, God constantly resided in this angel (Christ-Michael) and influenced this angel. God has now given this archangel, or prince and head of all angels, dominion and power over all things. ‘This government of Christ is frequently represented as a gift and a reward, and therefore must belong eminently to the inferior nature [of Christ], which alone is capable of rewards and gifts from God.’ It is because God has exalted Christ to be intercessor that Christ can particularly assist man, and not because Christ can himself ‘bestow effectual succor and relief.’ In keeping with the spirit of his century Watts proposes to give ‘A rational account how the man Jesus Christ may be vested with such extensive powers.’ Christ, he declares, does not now know ‘every single thought, word, or action of every particular creature,’ but does know ‘all the greater, more general, and more considerable affairs and transactions of nations, churches, and particular persons.’ Christ’s human soul is ‘the brightest image or copy of the divine nature that is found among mere creatures.’ Watts supposes that ‘it belongs only to the omniscience of God himself to take in with one infinite,

simultaneous and extensive view all the shapes, sizes, situations and motions' of every atom of the Universe, and Christ who is 'mere creature' does not share this prerogative. Christ, in the analogy of the author, is like a general watching a battle from an elevated position; he knows the way the battle is going, but 'cannot know every sword that is drawn, nor hear every groan.' Not even the 'glorious created mind of Christ' can share the infinite knowledge of God."³

In the question itself, "Who was Jesus Christ?" one faces a dilemma. Shall we phrase it, "Who *was* Jesus Christ?" or "Who *is* Jesus Christ?" ? As those who believe the early church creeds, we must say that what Jesus Christ was, He is, and what He is, He was. The unknown author of the Epistle to the Hebrews reminds us that He is "Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and forever" (Heb. 13:8). However, for this study, the question is: "Who was Jesus Christ?" I would suggest that it may be the most important question that we could ever ask, for ultimately the destiny of every living person, and dead person for that matter, hangs upon the answer given to it. The answer the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament gives is one that leads to eternal life, while answers that deny the conviction of the prophets and apostles are answers that lead one along the broad way that terminates in the Lake of Fire (Rev. 20:14, 15). The question is by no means a *new* question. It was asked by Jesus Himself. He asked, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" (Matt. 16:13). At this juncture in his earthly career, the Apostle Peter, answering for the disciples by divine illumination, exclaimed, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:18). It was a memorable statement, striking in the fact that it was made just at the point when it seemed that everything was going wrong, and disaster must soon follow. In his words Peter has spoken for Christ's people down through the centuries. And again, at a later point in His ministry, He threw out the biblical challenge, "What think ye of the Christ? Whose son is He?" (Matt. 22:42). And when the Jewish leaders answered correctly, "The son of David," He asked a further question, "How then doth David in spirit call him Lord, saying, The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand, till I make thine enemies thy footstool? If David then call him Lord, how is he his son?" (vv. 43-45). The question is unanswerable except by an affirmation of a divine-human Son of David, the Messiah.

Over the last few years, there has been a seemingly never ending attempt to disengage "Jesus" from His place in Orthodox Christianity. ABC devoted a special on the life of Christ with Peter Jennings reporting: *The Search for Jesus*. The program acknowledged that today, as in his own time, Jesus remains one of history's most intriguing and enigmatic figures, who is as elusive and mysterious as ever.⁴ Not to be outdone, CBS gave us the mini-series *Jesus* in May 2000. This Jesus turns out to be a New Age sensitive guy who would fit nicely in most of the TV sitcoms.⁵ This touches the problem we face today -- everybody wants to claim Jesus. James Sire makes this point, "To Eastern-oriented religious groups, Jesus is an avatar -- one of the many incarnations of God; to Christian Scientists, he is the Great Liberator; to Spiritualists, he is a first-rate medium; to one new consciousness philosopher, he is the prototype of Carlos Casteneda's don Juan, a sorcerer who can restructure events in the world by mental exercise. Everyone, it seems, wants Jesus for themselves (sic)."⁶ Let's not forget the Jesus of TBN's so-called "Faith" teachers, who proclaim a rich Jesus who wore designer clothes and promised financial prosperity to all of his followers.⁷ Edmund Clowney provides us with this important warning, "There is danger that you will begin to worship an imaginary Christ, not the Christ who says the things that are written, but a Christ of your own imagination, a harsh Christ who has not the meekness of Jesus, or a permissive Christ who is not the Holy One of God. It is so easy for us to invent another Christ and fail to be in subjection to the true Lord."⁸ The late John Gerstner persuasively argued that unless you come to a biblical understanding of Jesus (specifically that He is fully God and fully man) you are *not* a Christian -- period.⁹ But who is (or was) Jesus? There is the traditional view, of course, but hardly anyone (even among professing Christians) seems interested in the Christ who has come down to us in terms of orthodox theology. Others have come up with much wilder speculations. In 1970 the philologist, and expert on the Dead Sea Scrolls, John Allegro suggested that far from being a historical figure, Jesus was no more than the code-word for an ancient sex-cult inspired by a hallucinogenic mushroom. This did not enhance his academic reputation, and in the words of one critic "gave mushrooms a bad name!" Mr. Allegro died in 1988; his hypothesis did not survive him. In 1984, London Weekend Television screened a three-part program called *Jesus-The Evidence* (in which they had invested two years and over a half million

dollars, and came up with a rag-bag of theories including those suggesting that Jesus was a hypnotist, an occultist, a magician and a sexual deviant. In their book *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, M. Baigent, R. Leigh and H. Lincoln put forward the novel notions that Jesus was an intergalactic freedom fighter who came to earth and married, and that his descendants are secretly plotting to take over Europe!¹⁰ Some of you will recall that these two authors filed a lawsuit against Dan Brown claiming that his blockbuster best seller, *The DaVinci Code* was a rip-off of their book! Most of these ideas are far-fetched and others downright ridiculous. But even if you dismiss them, the obvious question still needs to be answered: Who is Jesus? Let us look at two passages in the Gospels that directly bear on this question: Who is Jesus Christ?

I. SUPERNATURAL RECOGNITION (Luke 4:34). *I know who you are.* The demon recognized Jesus as “the Holy One of God,” recalling Luke 1:35 (cf. Acts 3:14; John 6:69). That Luke took this to be essentially a synonym for *Christ, Lord, Son, and Son of Man* is evident from Luke 4:41, where the demons were able to say this because they knew that Jesus was the Christ. In 1:35 it is a synonym for “Son of God.” We are not told how the demon knew Jesus’ identity, but the assumption is that they possessed supernatural knowledge and thus recognized him. Thus they provided a reliable witness to Jesus’ identity as Luke pointed out in 4:41.¹¹ We learn from James 2:19 that demons do have a knowledge about God, but this confession of Jesus as the Holy One of God is strictly a true acknowledgement and not a saving confession as in Rom. 10:9. In the words of Geldenhuys, “This is not an exclamation of surprise but of terror and dismay. In the presence of the Holy One the demon is convicted by the knowledge that for him and his kind only destruction is waiting. He knows and recognizes Christ as the Holy One of God, and therefore cries out, shuddering with terror.”¹² “It is a pity,” moaned Scroggie, “that men deny the Deity of Christ when demons acknowledge it.”¹³

II. APOSTOLIC CONFESSION (John 6:69). The context of Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Sent One of God is dramatic and reflects the deep tension of the situation. The negative force of Jesus’ question conveys a certain pathos, which should be retained: “You (plural) also do *not* wish to go away, do you?” Peter’s reply on behalf of the Twelve yields three separable assertions: (1) There’s no one else to go to! They who have (truly) seen and (truly) heard Jesus know that there is none beside him (cf. Isa. 46:9; Acts 4:12). (2) Jesus speaks words that give to those who receive them the life of the world to come. (3) The expression of faith and hope has grown to fuller faith and knowledge (observe the perfect tense in v. 69 PEPISTEUKAMEN, lit. “We have come to a place of faith and continue there,”¹⁴ and EGNÖKAMEN, lit. “We have recognized the truth and hold it.”¹⁵), they now really believe and have come to know that Jesus is “the Holy One of God.”¹⁶ The title is no ordinary messianic designation. That is “holy” which belongs to God; hence, Jesus stands over against the world simply as the One who comes from the other world and belongs to God. Standing in that unique relation to God, he embodies the holiness of God, whom Israel confessed as “the Holy One of Israel.” To confess Jesus as the Holy One of God accordingly, is to give faith’s response to the utterance of Jesus in v. 21: “I am.” In the context of the Gospel as a whole, the Holy One of God, who has been consecrated by the Father and sent into the world (10:36), brings his mission to its God-ordained culmination in consecrating himself as a sacrifice for the world (17:19). He is the holy Redeemer.¹⁷ Peter’s answer is a genuine confession not only because in it he adopts Jesus’ words as his own (cf. v. 63b) but also because the faith that comes to expression in it reveals the awareness that Peter is confronting a radical choice: when life is at stake there is no other way to go than that of following Jesus (“to whom else...?” cf. 14:6). Verse 69 brings out the most basic component in the answer. It is not merely a spontaneous reaction of fidelity and attachment to Jesus’ challenging question; it reveals a deepened insight on the part of the disciples into the identity of the person in whom they have believed: “We have believed and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God.” The certainty of faith consists and rests in what it has grown to understand as its object: “The believer does not speak of himself but of him on whom he believes.”¹⁸ In light of the several indications in the Gospels of Peter’s growing appreciation of the Deity of Christ, though it is true that his term of address here (“Lord”) “could mean much or little” in itself, in this context, Morris writes, “there can be no doubt that the word has the maximum, not the minimum meaning”

of the ascription of Deity to Jesus.”¹⁹ Note the following observations. *First* as for his statement, “You are the Holy One of God,” while it is certainly a messianic title, several things can also be said in favor of viewing it as including the further affirmation, by implication, of Jesus’ divine origin and character. The first factor is Peter’s growing appreciation of who Jesus was. We noted earlier his confession of Jesus as his “Lord” (and that in the divine sense) on the occasion of his call to become a “fisher of men” in Luke 5 when, awed by Jesus’ supernatural knowledge and power over nature, he acknowledged his own sinfulness over against the majestic and ethical holiness of Jesus. We noted that his title of address there and here (“Lord”) suggest Deity, and, once a man has begun to apprehend that Jesus is divine, no title (with the exception of those that clearly mark him out as true man) he ever employs in referring to him can be totally void of intending the ascription of Deity. *Second*, while this title (“the Holy One of God”) is applied to Jesus on only one other occasion, leaving little room for extensive comparative study of the title, that one other occasion does cast some light on its meaning here. The title occurs in the mouth of the demoniac in the synagogue at Capernaum, clearly revealing the demon’s awareness of who Jesus was (Mark 1:24; Luke 4:34). The demon was obviously fearful of Jesus and implied that he had the power to cast it into hell, suggesting thereby that Jesus possessed divine authority and power as “the Holy One of God.” *Third*, the stress on holiness in the title is significant. It reminds us of the frequently occurring title for God, “the Holy One of Israel,” in the Old Testament.²⁰ In this connection, Morris writes: “There can be not the slightest doubt that the title is meant to assign to Jesus the highest possible place. It stresses his consecration and his purity. It sets Him with God and not man.”²¹

ENDNOTES

¹ This excerpt is from Douglas Bond’s *The Poetic Wonder of Isaac Watts* (<http://www.ligonier.org/store/the-poetic-wonder-of-isaac-watts-hardcover/>).

² www.americanpresbyterianchurch.org/gilded-tombs/Isaac-Watts-unitarianism/

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ cf. the interview Peter Jennings gave to *Christianity Today* (June 12, 2000), pp. 72-73.

⁵ The magazine *CCM: Music, Faith & Culture* (CCM stands for Contemporary Christian Music) devoted its April 2000 issue to the miniseries and raved about it even though they acknowledged that it had repeatedly taken extra-biblical liberties (i.e., sensational special effects like Jesus flying!) (p. 30), cf. the critique by R. M. Anker “Lights, Camera, Jesus: Hollywood looks at itself in the Mirror of the Messiah” *Christianity Today* (May 22, 2000), pp. 58-63.

⁶ J. W. Sire, *Scripture Twisting: 20 Ways the Cults Misread the Bible* (IVP, 1980), p. 24.

⁷ For extensive documentations on this cf. H. Hanegraaff, *Christianity In Crisis* (Harvest House, 1993).

⁸ E. P. Clowney, “The Unchanging Christ” in *Our Savior God: Studies on Man, Christ, and the Atonement*, ed. J. M. Boice (Baker, 1980), p. 77.

⁹ J. H. Gerstner, *Primitive Theology: The Collected Primers of John H. Gerstner* (Soli Deo Gloria, 1996), pp. 115-160.

¹⁰ cf. John Blanchard, *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?* (Evangelical Press, 1989), p. 14.

¹¹ cf. R. H. Stein, *Luke: The New American Commentary* (Broadman, 1992), p. 163.

¹² N. Geldenhuys, *The Gospel of Luke* (Eerdmans, 1979), p. 173.

¹³ *Dr. W. Graham Scroggie on Luke & John* (rpt. Ark Publishing, 1981), p. 21.

¹⁴ L. Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Eerdmans, 1977), p. 390.

¹⁵ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (SPCK, 1978), p. 207.

¹⁶ Warfield made this important observation, “First of all, then, we notice that there seems to be an element of boastfulness in this confession. This suggests itself by the obtrusion of the personal pronoun. We might read our English version and think of the emphasis falling on the believing and knowing which is asserted. We cannot so read the Greek. The emphasis falls rather on the ‘we.’ ‘And as for us,’ says Peter, ‘we at least’ have believed. Peter is contrasting himself and his fellow apostles with others, and priding himself on the contrast.” B. B. Warfield, *Faith & Life* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1990), p. 106.

¹⁷ cf. G. Beasley-Murray, *John: Word Biblical Commentary* (Word, 1987), p. 97.

¹⁸ cf. H. Ridderbos, *the Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1997), p. 249.

¹⁹ L. Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Eerdmans, 1977), p. 389.

²⁰ This summarization is taken from R.L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nelson, 1998), pp. 280-281.

²¹ Morris, p. 390.