

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE DEITY OF CHRIST: SOME IMPORTANT TERMS

After Jesus calmed the stormy sea (in the Old Testament, the God of Israel is Lord of the roaring sea, cf. Ps. 33:7, 65:7, 77:16; Job 12:15) and rebuked His disciples for their fear and lack of faith, they were awestruck and said to one another, “What manner of man is this, that even the wind and sea obey Him?” (Mark 4:35-41). In response to this question, the writer to the Hebrews declares, “He is the radiance of His (God’s) glory and the exact representation of His nature, upholding all things by the word of His power” (Heb. 1:3). The Apostle Paul proclaims that “He is the image of God, He has primacy over all created things” (Col. 1:15). The Jehovah’s Witnesses, in their *New World Translation* (NWT), renders the passage this way: “He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; because by means of him all [other] things were created in the heavens and upon the earth, the things visible and the things invisible, no matter whether they are thrones or lordships or governments or authorities. All [other] things have been created through him and for him. Also, he is before all [other] things and by means of him all [other] things were made to exist.” You will note the four occurrences of the word *other* (in brackets). In the foreword of the NWT the editors state, “enclosed words inserted to complete or clarify the sense in the English text.” By inserting the word *other*, however, the translators have not merely “completed” or “clarified” the English translation, they have altered the meaning of the original. Why? A look at the Jehovah’s Witnesses doctrines of the Bible and of God and Jesus soon reveals the answer. Over the next few weeks we will be examining a number of texts that are appealed to by Jehovah’s Witnesses to justify their beliefs. Jehovah’s Witnesses deny the doctrine of the Trinity and the coequality of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, holding instead a modern form of the ancient heresy of *Arianism*. Christ, they believe, was created by God as a spirit-creature named Michael. Then, through Christ, God made all other created things. Therefore, if Scripture is to fit preconceived doctrine, Col. 1:15-20 needs *clarification*, to-wit, *amending*. Otherwise, the Bible is here declaring that Christ is *before all things* and in fact was involved in the creation of all things. It would, in short, make him, as historic Christian orthodoxy teaches, coeternal with God. Robert Millett, a leading Mormon theologian, contends that the doctrine of Christ was corrupted by the early church – especially by the creeds of the first four centuries, and that the Prophet Joseph Smith was God’s instrument in bringing about a restoration.¹ The deity of Jesus Christ is taught on practically every page of the New Testament. Every attempt to rid the New Testament of His deity is a hopeless and impossible task. Men do, however, attempt the impossible. In their blind rage they will seize any and every possible text that they think will lend itself to their purposes. Usually they focus upon certain words or phrases that on the surface can be construed to teach Jesus Christ is something less than deity. This study will seek to examine some of the terms that are often put forth as evidence that Jesus Christ is not God.

I. **TERMS USED BY GOSPELS.**

- A. ***Son of Man*** – Jesus used this term in reference to Himself more than any other. If frequency is any guide (this phrase occurs over 80 times in the Gospels), then this was Jesus’ favorite

term or title. It is usually stated that just as Son of God refers to His deity, so “Son of Man” refers to his humanity. This is an over-simplification and is very misleading. In fact, the term really is *not* a description of His person per se, but rather emphasizes His work and function as Messiah.

1. *Old Testament Usage* – There are passages in the Old Testament where this simply means “man” (cf. Ps. 6:5). It is used extensively of the prophet Ezekiel (cf. Ezk. 2:1). Its New Testament usage, however, is based upon Dan. 7:13f., where “Son of Man” is a heavenly being who is clothed with majesty. This is the way the term is to be understood in reference to Christ (cf. Mt. 13:41, 16:27, 24:31, where Jesus refers to Himself as the “Son of Man” with the additional suggestion of His glorious majesty, i.e. He has “his angels” and “his kingdom” and “he judges.”).
2. *Usage Of The Term In The Gospels* – The immediate connection with Dan. 7:13 is to be understood. In fact, the term was a synonym for “Messiah” and was understood as such by the Jews (cf. Jn. 12:34). Further, when used by Jesus, He applied the expression to Himself as the Christ (cf. Mk. 8:38, 13:26, 14:61). Taken as a whole, the term involved *four* distinct, but interrelated, ideas:
 - a. *Suffering*. The Messiah suffers vicariously (Mt. 20:28; Mk. 10:45; Lk. 19:10, 24:26, 24:28).
 - b. *Vindication*. The suffering Messiah is resurrected (Mt. 20:19; Mk. 10:34; Lk. 24:7; Jn. 12:23).
 - c. *Glory and Power*. The victorious Messiah (Mt. 24:27, 30, 39, 44; Mk. 13:26, 14:62; Lk. 22:69; Jn. 13:31).
 - d. *Judgment*. The ruling king (Mt. 16:27, 28, esp. 25:31-46; Mk. 8:38; Lk. 21:36; Jn. 5:27).
3. *The Meaning Of The Term In The Gospel*. “The church,” writes Strimple, “has traditionally understood these sayings as the *ipsissima vox Jesu*, and the phrase *Son of Man* as Jesus’ foremost self-designation, chosen precisely because the title, although assuredly Messianic (cf. Dan. 7:13), was ambiguous. Its “mysterious” character enabled Him to reveal as well as conceal His Messianic identity, to claim to be the Messiah with little danger of then-current erroneous perceptions of the office being read into it before He could infuse it with the full-orbed content of the Messianic task foreshadowed in and predicted by the Old Testament.”² The chief thing to note regarding the phrase “Son of Man” is that it implies humiliation, a voluntary self-abnegation for a specific purpose. It designates the Messiah’s mission. Upon the accomplishment of His initial mission (redemption), He returns to His original place (Jn. 6:62) not in humiliation but in vindication and victory. He is vested with all authority and judgment and will return to the sphere of His humiliation as sovereign judge and ruler. Therefore, the primary import of the term *Son of Man* has to do with the One who inaugurates the Kingdom of God, first by His vicarious atonement and then by His authority to rule and reign. It places a greater emphasis upon the work and function of the Messiah than upon His immediate Person. Jesus used this term constantly (rather than “King of Israel” or “Son of David”), especially when addressing the populace who failed to see the suffering Messiah of the Old Testament (Jn. 12:34). The cross must precede the crown (Lk. 24:26).
4. *Only Begotten*. Lee Irons has demonstrated very convincingly that the Greek word *monogenēs* should be understood in the traditional sense as *only begotten*. The Son is eternally generated by or begotten of the Father. “Of course, the concept of a human father begetting a human son is an analogy or metaphor that is being used by John as a

way of pointing to the eternal Son's relationship with the Father. It is a relationship of love, intimacy, and delight. When the Son is sent into the world, he comes in obedience to his Father's will. Ultimately the Son reveals the Father because, by being the offspring begotten of the Father's divine nature, he possesses the same divine nature as the Father. Therefore, like all metaphors, there are notable points of discontinuity: unlike a human begetting, this begetting (1) had no beginning, (2) did not occur in time, (3) does not grant the Father chronological priority over the Son, and (4) lacks the involvement of a mother. But there is an analogy between human biological begetting and intra-Trinitarian begetting. The main points of continuity are: (1) the Father is the source or cause of the Son, (2) the Son possesses the same nature (*homoousios*) with the Father who begat him, (3) the Father delights in his Son and calls him "beloved," and (4) it is fitting that the Son is the one sent on a mission from the Father to do the Father's will."³

II. **TERMS USED IN THE REST OF THE NEW TESTAMENT.**

- A. **First Born Of All Creation** – This expression is found in Col. 1:15 and is in context with the statement that Jesus Christ "is the image of the invisible God." The Greek word for *image* is *eikon*. Christ is the exact representation of the invisible God (comp. Heb. 1:3). Image refers to likeness and contains the concept of derivation. In a word, He is the exact copy of God. The word "image" tells us three things: (1) Jesus is **the** Son of God, (2) He is the **Eternal** Son of God, and (3) He is **God** (cf. 2 Cor. 4:4 [1 Cor. 11:7 – man is called "the image and glory of God" – man's image is by creation]). The expression "First-born of all creation" (Gk. *prōtotokos pasēs ktiseōs*) is Messianic (cf. Ps. 89:26). It declares that the Messiah is an eternal being. He has a *priority* to all creation. It states a relationship between Christ and creation. He is the Creator, the Sovereign Lord over all creation by His own virtue and authority. Paul declares the Deity of Christ first by His relation to the Father (His *image*) and to the universe (the *first-born*).

Note: Such expressions as "the First-born from among the dead" (Col. 1:18), "the First-born of the dead" (Rev. 1:5) and "The Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the beginning of the creation of God" (Rev. 3:14) are all soteriological designations that advert especially to Christ's resurrection and not to the nature of His person.

CONCLUSION: The failure to grasp the significance of Christ's work usually leads to defective views of His person (and, naturally, vice-versa). Our eternal destiny depends upon the person and works of Christ. Our election was made in Christ in eternity past, before the foundation of the world (cf. Eph. 1:4; comp. with John 17:24 and 2 Tim. 1:9). If Christ is not eternal, then neither is our election. God the Son sustains an eternal relationship to the Father by way of His nature. If there is not an eternal Son, then there is no eternal Father. The Father as God begets. The Son as God is begotten; the Holy Spirit as God proceeds. We cannot call God, Father, and deny that He begets; and the One that is begotten is the Son. Jesus Christ has always sustained *this* relationship to the Father as the Son. It is part of His glory, which He has always possessed (cf. Jn. 17:24). The terms we have covered in this section are words that relate in one way or another to the *work* of Christ. They set forth the character of His work in the incarnation and redemption. To those who have been redeemed by the Redeemer, there is the witness of the Spirit (cf. Jn. 14:15-26, 15:26, 16:13-15). Those who deny the Deity of Christ's evidence only that they do not have the Spirit. There is a pressing need today to return to historic Christian faith as it is expressed in the creeds of the early church and the confessions of the Reformed faith. In particular, as Gerald Bray writes: "The creeds of Christendom are basic statements of belief which take up these questions and answer them in the context of the Person of Christ. There is a great need today to return to these foundations of our faith and probe just how they can help us to answer the doubts of our time and bring the gospel of Christ to bear once again on the affairs of men."⁴

ENDNOTES

¹ Millett writes, “We do not accept the Christ that emerges from centuries of debates and councils and creeds. Over the years that followed the death and resurrection of the Lord, Christians sought to *earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints* (Jude 1:3). We believe that the epistles of Paul, Peter, Jude, and John suggest that the apostasy of the Christian Church was well under way by the close of the first century. With the deaths of the Apostles and the loss of the priesthood and its keys, the institutional power to perform saving ordinances, learn the mind of God, and interpret scripture was no longer on earth. To be sure, there were noble men and women throughout the earth during the centuries that followed, religious persons of goodwill, learned men who sought to hold the Church together and to preserve holy writ. But we believe that these acted without prophetic authority.” “A Different Jesus? The Christ of The Restoration” in *Jesus Christ: Son of God, Saviour*, eds. P. H. Peterson, G. L. Hatch & L. D. Card (Religious Studies Center BYU, 2002), p. 182. Millett later explained this into a book. *A Different Jesus? The Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (Eerdmans, 2005). I wrote a critique of this in *By Faith Alone: Answering Challenges to The Doctrine of Justification*, eds. G. L. W. Johnson and G. P. Waters (Crossway, 2006), pp. 191-204.

² Robert Strimple, *Jesus, Divine Messiah: The New Testament Witness* (P & R, 1990), p. 55. He later concludes, “that when Jesus employed the title, He was self-consciously claiming to be the Danielic “man-like figure,” and hence the Messiah, uniting within the one Old Testament figure two motifs: Isaiah’s Suffering Servant and Daniel’s Son of Man coming apocalyptically to judge the earth and complete the Kingdom of God.” P. 61; the expression *ipsissima vox* is Latin and refers to “the very words”/“the very voice,” the exact words or language spoken or written by an individual and preserved without any change. Especially applied to the actual words of Jesus as preserved in the Gospels as distinct from sayings attributed to Him by the early church; if the actual words are not preserved, one seeks the actual message or “the very voice.” Cf. *The Student’s Dictionary for Biblical & Theological Studies*, eds. F. B. Huey, Jr. and B. Corley (Zondervan, 1983), p. 107.

³ C. L. Irons, “A Lexical Defense of The Johannine *Only-Begotten*” in *Retrieving Eternal Generation*, eds. F. Sanders and S. R. Swain (Zondervan, 2017), p. 115.

⁴ Gerald Bray, *Creeds, Councils and Christ* (IVP, 1984), p. 171.