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## The Deity of Christ

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# The Deity of Christ

by Daniel R. Mitchell

**T**wo factors have emerged in the twentieth century to radically alter the way theologians interpret the Person and work of Christ. The first is a shift from an uncritical to a critical reading of Scripture. The second is the change from a static to an evolutionary understanding of human existence. The first of these has especially altered the way theologians talk about the deity of Christ; the second, His humanity. Beyond this, of course, the doctrines of the resurrection, atonement, and second coming of Christ have also undergone profound change. While attention needs to be given to all of these concerns, this article intends to focus only on the matter of the deity of Christ.

## The Modern Crisis in Christology

Early in the twentieth century it was generally conceded, even by liberal theologians, that the price was too high to pay for the extreme reductionist tendencies of the previous century. Its skepticism and antisupernaturalist bias had reduced Scripture to legend and Jesus to an improbable figure lost almost entirely to history. In that context Machen's assessment was correct. One could be a Christian or a liberal, but not both at once (*Christianity and Liberalism*). The trend today is to elevate the traditional doctrines of Christianity to respectability without returning to a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible. The result is neither orthodoxy nor liberalism. It is neo-orthodoxy. But here the vocabulary of fundamental Christianity is more and more being absorbed into a context entirely foreign to the gospel.

Nowhere is this trend more evident than in connection with the deity of Jesus Christ. His relationship to God is affirmed, but when many modern writers are carefully studied what is really meant is that in Christ God speaks to the depths of the human person (Bultmann), or Jesus is the definitive revelation of God's redemptive love (Cullmann), or He is God for us (Barth, Bonhoeffer), or He is the historical manifestation of the eternal unit of God and man (Tillich), or He is God's representative (Kung), or He is the end of history (Pannenberg), or He is the means by which God suffers abandonment (Moltmann), or He is a process and the name for the believer's hope (Cobb). The list could go on.



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It is not possible here to talk about how theologians justify this kind of revisionism, but there is no question that the crisis in biblical authority precipitated the crisis in Christology. The comment by G.C. Berkouwer, nearly thirty years ago, is still relevant today. "Hence, . . . the essential question will remain whether the testimony of Scripture can in fact be the foundation of the confession (that Christ is God)" (*The Person of Christ*, pp. 160, 61, parenthesis mine). He went on to point out, "The Scriptures, certainly, never provide us with a theoretical picture of the deity of Christ. The practice of the ancient church, to speak of Christ "as of God," goes directly back to the New Testament itself where we hear adoring voices addressing Christ as truly God and not quazi-God" (*ibid*, pp. 161,62).

## Evidences for the Deity of Christ

It is important to realize that the doctrine of the deity of Christ does not rest on isolated and ambiguous texts of Scripture. There are at least four lines of evidence in Scripture upon which it is based.

**Scripture explicitly asserts the deity of Christ.** The enemies of Christ in the first century were not confused when they charged: "For a good work we stone thee not, but for blasphemy; and because that thou, being a man, makest thyself God" (John 10:33). Liberal theologians who deny that Jesus ever claimed to be God fail, utterly, to explain why He was put to death by His enemies and worshipped by His followers. There can be no question that the ultimate source of the claim that Christ is God is Jesus, Himself. In many different ways our Lord asserted His deity to His listeners. In His Sermon on the Mount He claimed authority over the Mosaic Law and other institutions dictated by God in the Old Testament (Matt. 5:31-34, 38, 39; 7:28-29; see also 12:6-8). On other occasions He claimed to be the object of saving faith (John 10:30; 14:1; 17:3). In a passage strongly reminiscent of Jesus' experiences as a carpenter's apprentice He declares that the Son does what He sees the Father doing. But for Jesus, that means more than just working with a carpenter's tools, that means raising the dead and giving life at will (John 5:19-21). He goes on to demand honor equal to that given to the Father (John 5:23; see also 8:19; 12:44, 45; 13:20). The relationship He claimed to have with the Father was utterly unique (Matt. 11:27; John 5:19-20; 10:30, etc.). He claimed to satisfy man's deepest needs (Matt. 11: 28-30; John 6:35; 14:6) and to be able to give eternal life and safety to His people (John 7:37, 10:27-29; 11:25-26).

In another way, many of the designations used by Christ

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# Christ

Daniel R. Mitchell

Theologians justify the question that the crisis in the world, nearly thirty years ago, is the essential question: "Is Christ God?" (Hebrews 1:1-3). He is not only the Son of God, but He is also the Father of Christ. The Father of Christ "as of Himself" where He is truly God and

the deity of Jesus in Scripture

of Christ. The text is confused when we see not, but for a man, makest us who deny that explain why He is shipped by His ultimate source self. In many difficult listeners. In His over the Mosaic in the Old Testament also 12:6-8). On the text of saving faith is reminiscent of He declares that. But for Jesus, carpenter's tools, life at will (John 1 to that given to 45; 13:20). The Father was utterly. He claimed to John 6:35; 14:6). His deity to His people is used by Christ

to speak of Himself are tacit claims to deity. The "I am" claims of Jesus are the clearest examples of this. It is generally agreed today that the background of the *ego eimi* (lit. "I am") of the NT is to be found in the OT *Ani hu* (Lit. "I am He"). The force of the expression is illustrated by the use of Deuteronomy 32 and Psalm 43 in Jewish liturgical celebration in the first century, where God is repeatedly addressed as *Ani hu*. In fact, the expression became a popular phrase by which to speak of Jehovah in His manifestation to His people (see also Exod. 3:4, Isa. 41:4; 43:10; 46:4). There is also ample evidence that the expression *hu* was a favorite designation for Jehovah during Jesus' lifetime. Thus, the "I am" of Jesus was an extremely audacious claim as to who He was, and is only fully explained as an affirmation of deity.

Sometimes Jesus used this expression in connection with a number of different metaphors. For example, He says "I am the bread of life" (John 6:20), "I am the light of the world" (8:12), "I am the door" (10:7), "I am the good shepherd" (10:10), "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25), "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (14:6), and "I am the true vine" (15:1). In each of these instances Jesus asserts His deity by claiming to meet the deepest human needs.

On other occasions Jesus used this expression in an absolute form (see John 4:26; 6:20; 8:24, 28, 58; 13:19; 18:5, 6, 8). The most remarkable of these is 8:58 where Jesus asserts, "before Abraham was, I am." For his Jewish hearers this statement is an unmistakable allusion to Exodus 3:13-15 where Jehovah is introduced ("before Abraham") and unity with Jehovah ("I am"). Those who heard Him threatened to stone Him for blasphemy.

While the Jews eventually had Him crucified for asserting deity, Jesus' followers were all the more committed to Him because of it. John, the beloved disciple, introduces Jesus in his Gospel as "the Word (who) was with God; and... was God" (John 1:1). Emboldened by the Holy Spirit, Peter stood upon the Temple steps and proclaimed Jesus as "both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36). Thomas, with all of his doubts dispelled in the presence of the resurrected Christ, testifies to us that he

believed Jesus Christ to be a Person like no other. "My Lord and my God," he was heard to declare (John 20:28-31). The great missionary, pastor, theologian, and apostle, Paul, describes our Lord as "God blessed forever" (Rom. 9:5), and "the great God and our Savior, Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13). He wrote to the Philippian believers that it was entirely appropriate for Jesus (and for us as well) to think of Christ as "equal with God" (Phil. 2:6).

This line of evidence for the deity of Christ is so strong in the Bible that theologians who reject the doctrine have usually done so only after minimizing its significance in one way or another. For example, they are often given to altering the text, denigrating its authority, or placing claims to deity into the category of much later additions to the biblical text. But any unbiased reader must know that evidence cannot be dismissed simply because it doesn't support our prejudice. Again, the biblical evidence must be allowed to speak for itself. When this is done the logic and power of these claims is inescapable. They must either be true or false. If the latter, then they are obviously lies and blasphemous. Accordingly, we could never expect God to honor them. But when God raised Jesus from the dead He both honored and certified all that He said and did. Thus, His claims to deity must be considered valid and true.

**Scripture gives divine honor to Christ.** John records Jesus as saying "That all men should honor the Son, even as they honor the Father" (John 5:23). Jesus appeals to the disciples in the Upper Room with the words, "Ye believe in God, believe also in me" (John 14:1). The author of Hebrews tells us that Jesus is the "brightness of (God's) glory, and the express image of his person" (Heb. 1:3), and He is the object of worship by the angels (1:6). One day, Paul says, every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil. 2:10). Only a few men have ever had a glimpse of God's Son in His glory. But on every occasion the response was the same. They fell prostrate before Him, to honor and worship Him as God (cf. esp. Isa. 6:5; Rev. 1:17,18).

**Scripture ascribes works to Christ that only God can do.** There

are some activities which are, distinctly, prerogatives or powers of God. God alone is sovereign. Yet Christ makes the assertion that He has been given "all authority" (Matt. 28:18), and it is recorded that He exercised this authority over demons (Mark 5:11-15), death (Matt. 9:25; Luke 7:14,15), disease (Luke 4:38-41), and nature (Matt. 8:23-27), to mention only a few instances. Once, when He was being charged with blasphemy Jesus responded: "Say ye of him, whom the Father hath sanctified and sent into the world, thou blasphemest; because I said, I am the Son of God? If I do not the works of my Father, believe me not. But if I do, . . . believe the works, that ye may know, and believe, that the Father is in me, and I in him" (John 10:36-38).

God alone is the Creator. Yet Christ is said to have created all things (John 1:3), to have made the worlds (Heb. 1:2), the heavens (Heb. 1:10), and to have laid the foundation of the earth (Heb. 1:10). To the Colossians Paul wrote "All things were created by him and for him" (1:16).

The preservation and providential control over creation are exclusively divine activities. But Scripture speaks of Christ as "upholding all things by the word of his power" (Heb. 1:3) and it is said that "by him all things consist (lit. "are held together")" (Col. 1:17). Only God can forgive sin (Matt. 2:7), but Jesus on many occasions did just that (Matt. 9:2,7; Mark 2:1-12; Luke 7:47,48; Col. 3:13). God alone has life in Himself, but it is claimed that Christ is given authority to raise the dead and to give life at will (John 6:39,40,54; 11:25; 20:25,28). This includes physical life (John 11:43,44), resurrection life (John 8:28-29), and spiritual life (John 6:33,54,57; 1 John 5:20). Scripture teaches that God is the righteous Judge. But the execution of judgment has been given to Jesus Christ (John 5:22; Acts 10:42).

Only God can receive worship (Matt. 4:8-10; Acts 12:21-23), yet Christ both receives worship and on some occasions demands it (Matt. 8:2; 9:18; 16:15-17; Phil. 2:10; Heb. 1:6; Rev. 5:8-13). Beyond all this, Jesus receives and answers prayer (John 14:14; Acts 7:59), He demands obedience and discipleship of men (Matt.

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theology, standards, or program. He goes to endorse God, His Word, His Son, and His Truth. If God has opened the door, whether it be to a Jewish synagogue, to the Sanhedrin, to Mars Hill, to the home of a Pharisee, to the prophets of Baal, to King Ahab, or to the immoral woman at the well, then God is the sponsor, and the One to whom he must answer. Of course, the man who stands for Christ in any of these arenas must count the cost and be willing to suffer the consequences of attack or rejection that Jesus and the saints of Scripture knew so well.

### The Fruit of Biblical Separation

It is not difficult to distinguish between man-made separation and biblical separation. The results are entirely different. Man-made separation is based on the traditions of men. It tends to exalt either external separation or internal, heart separation, to the exclusion of the other. In addition, man-made separation, because it is motivated by proud comparison with others, results in divisiveness and man-centeredness ("I am of Paul, and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ" — 1 Cor. 1:12). Scripture clearly teaches that such contention is rooted in pride (Prov. 13:10). Strife, bad reports, discord, self-righteousness, lack of love, and critical, railing spirits in the church all indicate a lack of biblical separation, as clearly as does an emphasis on love apart from the bounds of biblical truth. Such a fleshly, carnal separation often violates clear commands of Scripture in the process of defending positions on separation (e.g., "Walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" — Eph. 4:1-3).

The Christian or church that is biblically separated will always manifest the fruit of the Spirit.

Rather than emphasizing human traditions or personal preferences, Paul "determined not to know anything among you, save **Jesus Christ**, and him crucified." He insisted that boasting about men and their positions

was an evidence of spiritual immaturity and carnality. "For ye are yet carnal (yielding to the flesh): for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?" (1 Cor. 3:3).

The child of God is to live a life of separation from all unrighteousness. He is to emulate Christ in His love for sinners and his hatred for sin. He is to reprove the **works** of darkness by the light of his holy life and God's holy Word. The light of Christ within us must not be placed under the bushel of unscripturally applied "separation." Rather it must be placed where it can give light to our dark world. Then we can once again engage ourselves in the real battle with the real enemy, exposing and expelling darkness and rescuing sinners from that darkness into the marvelous, glorious Light of Life — our Savior, Jesus Christ. □

For a more detailed discussion of this topic, read the book, *Separation: Biblically Defined*, by Del Fehsenfeld, Jr. Available by writing to Life Action Ministries, Buchanan, Michigan 49107, \$2.95.

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4:19; 8:22; 19:21; Mark 2:14), He builds the church and maintains it (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 4:7-16). There can be no doubt that the things Christ is said to do are reflective of the prerogatives and powers of deity.

**Scripture presents Christ as the Second Person of the Trinity.** Lewis Sperry Chafer observes: "In every disclosure respecting the triune relationship, the Son occupies a place of essential equality with the Father and the Spirit. To the Son are ascribed the same worship, the same honor, the same glory" (*Systematic Theology*, Vol. V, p. 9). The three Persons are placed together in the baptismal formula (Matt. 28:19; Acts 2:38; Rom. 6:3). Paul, characteristically, links the Father and the Son together in his salutations to his epistles (1 Cor. 1:3; Eph. 1:2, etc.). They are seen to minister together in the lives of believers (John 14:23; 2 Thess. 2:16,17). Christ is said to have all things in common with the Father (John 16:15;

17:10). John is present when Jesus reflects fondly upon the glory He once shared with the Father in eternity and to which He will shortly be returning (John 17:5).

From all of this we can see that if Scripture is taken authoritatively and Jesus is taken seriously, there can be no question that Jesus claimed to be God and the NT faithfully witnesses to this assertion.

### The Deity of Christ — Fundamental to Christianity

In the twentieth century the biblical doctrine of the deity of Christ has become a rock of offense and a stone of stumbling. Modern, liberal theologians and preachers, like the Pharisees of old, would take up stones to do away with our precious Lord. Against such, Fundamentalists must redouble their efforts. Here lies the cornerstone of theology, the touchstone of faith, and the capstone of all preaching. If Christ is not God He is a liar. If He is a liar, He is no Savior. If He is no Savior, He provides no hope and we are of all men most to be pitied. For John the affirmation of this doctrine identified authentic Christianity and became the measure of fellowship. For today's preacher there can be no equivocation on this fundamental truth. Charles Wesley said it all when he wrote:

Ye servants of God, your Master  
proclaim,  
And publish abroad His wonderful  
name;  
The name all victorious of Jesus extol:  
His kingdom is glorious, He rules over  
all.

God ruleth on high, almighty to save,  
And still He is nigh — His presence  
we have;  
The great congregation His triumph  
shall sing,  
Ascribing salvation to Jesus our King.

Then let us adore and give Him his  
right —  
All glory and power, and wisdom and  
might,  
All honor and blessing, with angels  
above,  
And thanks never ceasing, and in-  
finite love. □