



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Who Was Jesus Christ?

“Deity Testimony, part I”

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] Our subject in this study is Who Was Jesus Christ? 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 a believing Christian I 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, Hebrews 13:8. However, for this study we’ll phrase it, who was Jesus Christ?

Christians believe that it may be the most important question that a mere man could frame. 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 give 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 destruction. The question is by no means a new question. It was asked by the Lord himself. At Caesarea Philippi when it had become quite evident that the nation would not receive his message as part of the preparation of the disciples for the message of his coming death he asked, “Who do men say that I the Son of man am?” Matthew 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.” 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 men and women down through the centuries. And again, at a later stage in his ministry, he threw out the biblical challenge, “What think ye of the Christ, whose Son is he?” Matthew 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?” The question is unanswerable except by an affirmation of a divine human son of David, the Messiah.

Answers to the question are still being offered, and they're remarkable largely in their diversity. Papinas saw him as the poet. Bruce Barton saw him as the man of action. Lord Beaver Brooks saw him as the divine propagandist, not surprising for a news paper man. Middleton Murray marveled at his imagination and portrayed him as the man of the future, possessed of the imagination of a genius. Philip Schaff, the well known church historian, said, “The life and character of Jesus Christ is the holy of holies in the history of the world.” H.G. Wells said that judged by a historian standards Jesus stands first in history.

Why then do history texts devote only passing references to a humanistic Jesus whose life could never seriously affect, much less change, the course of history? Perhaps part of the answer is that modern theologians, dominated by antisupernaturalism, have a generally lower view of him. For example, in the major article entitled “Jesus Christ” in the latest edition of the major German reference work on religion, Professor Hanz Conzelmann comes to the conclusion that Jesus never called himself Son of God or Son of man. He was only a great teacher and miracle worker. On the other hand, it's surely remarkable that in Judaism today there is much interest in Jesus of Nazareth. In fact, much interest in claiming Jesus for the Jews. We shall deal with this later in these studies,

but listen to the words of Rabbi Maurice Nathan Eisendrath. He says, “Who can compute what Jesus has meant to humanity? What might he yet mean for our solar, distracted and desperate day?” If one wishes to really come to know a person is it not best to hear those who have the closest access to him? If this is only partially so, then it is of great importance to listen to those who knew Jesus Christ. And if we may assume that his apostles wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit then from them we may have an authoritative interpretation of the person of Christ, one that we can rely upon. So let’s listen to them.

The first is the testimony of Matthew the evangelist and apostle. In Matthew the tax gatherer’s account of Jesus’ birth there occur these words,

“And she shall bring forth a son and thou shalt call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins. Now all this was done (Matthew says) that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet saying, Behold a virgin shall be with child and shall bring forth a son and they shall call his name Emanuel (which being interpreted is “God with us” Matthew 1:21-23).”

It is the angel of the Lord who has announced the birth of Jesus to Joseph, but it is the evangelist Matthew who has interpreted what has happened as the fulfillment of the prophecy of a virgin birth in Isaiah 7:14.

Now differences of opinion exist among interpreters over the precise sense of Isaiah 7:14. Some see the prophecy as a typical prophecy, referring first to Isaiah’s family, God providing the prophet with a sign for the nation. The birth would be a sign of God’s undergirding of the nation in its time of crisis. Only ultimately does the sign point on to the coming of the Son of God, the paramount source of support for Israel by this view.

Others see the prophecy as directly prophetic of the son of Mary the virgin. The supernatural sign of the virgin birth of the Messiah who would be called Emanuel or God

with us, would assure Israel of the faithfulness of the Lord God to the Abrahamic promises. We shall not attempt to settle the question of interpretation here, and it's doubtful that anyone can settle it. But we simply note that by either view, the full sense of the words relates ultimately to Jesus Christ and if so, then the word Emanuel, the Hebrew immanuel, explains the nature of the Messiah Jesus Christ, he is very God of very God and God with us. In other words, Matthew the Jew stands on the side of those who affirm the full deity of Jesus of Nazareth.

There is sound evidence that Matthew was a competent student of Isaiah, for in chapter 7 through 12 of the book, which scholars have called “the Book of Emanuel,” there are further indications of the full deity of the virgin's son. One might look at Isaiah 8:8 and Isaiah 11:1-5. This is particularly evident in the famous prophecy of chapter 9 and verse 6, “For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.” The full deity of the figure to whom Isaiah refers is patent.

The second testimony is the testimony of the Apostle John, the one who leaned on Jesus' breast. In John's gospel there are several texts that bear on the question, who was Jesus Christ? And they provide an answer to another related question that has interested scholars, namely, can we call Jesus ‘God?’ The first of the texts is that magnificent statement that opens John's Gospel, “In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God.” This is without doubt one of the most majestic statements in all of Scripture. The opening phrase, “In the beginning” is an allusion to Genesis 1:1. But the was of the text in John takes the reader back beyond the creation. It says in effect at the time of the creation the word was already in existence. “John,” as Calvin says, “takes his readers back to the eternal sanctuary of God in thought.” The opening clause then, “In the beginning was the word” stresses the eternity of the word.

Arius, the 4th Century Alexandrian heretic whose views were condemned at the council of Nicea in 325 A.D., said of Christ, “There was a time when he was not.” The council however, followed the apostolic teaching, denying Arius’s views, which have lingered on in many cultic groups, such as the Jehovah’s witnesses, and the Mormons who deny the eternality of the Son, and the divine trinity.

The second clause, “and the word was God” or “was with God” stresses the Son’s community of interest with the Father. The words describe in brief the eternal communion of the Son and the Father. Suggestively referred to in verse 18 where John says that the Son is in the bosom of the Father.

The final clause declares the deity of the word, “and the word was God.” Many attempts have been made by the heretics to deny that John affirms our Lord’s deity here. A few, from ignorance of the Greek language, have contended that because the definite article is missing before the word God, the clause should be translated, “and the word was a god.” But the article is missing simply because John wished to make it plain that the word was not the only one to whom the word God was applicable. If John had said the word was the God, then he would have implied that the term God applied only to the second person of the trinity, manifestly false teaching.

The term of course, refers also to the Father and the Spirit. John’s purpose in the omission of the article then is to lay stress on the nature of the being of the word. And the word was such a being as God, is not an incorrect paraphrase of his thought. If I were to say, “Men must be redeemed by a man” and Jesus is the man, I would be identifying Jesus with the requirement. If however, I were to say, “By man came death, and by man also must come the resurrection of the dead” and Jesus was man, then I’m classifying Jesus as a man. That is the force of “and the word was God.” The second person is properly classified as a divine being. By opening his gospel in this fashion John wants us to read his gospel in the light of the deity of the Son. His mighty signs and words as recorded in this gospel are the miracles and words of God. If this is not so, then

the book is blasphemous. The Son then, is the eternal God, yet distinct from the Father in personality.

A second passage in John is of importance. It too is found in the prologue. Some of the oldest manuscripts of John 1:18 read, “No one has ever seen God, but God the only Son who is at the Father’s side has made him known” the New International Version rendering of that text. If we could be sure that John wrote this then we could be sure that John taught Christ’s deity plainly from this passage. The text however, is uncertain in the manuscript tradition and it’s not possible to be sure it means anything other than the Son ship of Christ.

A third of the passages, in the midst of our Lord’s final public testimony at the Feast of Dedication there is an interesting statement bearing upon the essential unity of the Father and the Son. It is found in the statement of verse 30 of chapter 10. In the context Jesus says, “I and the Father are one.” The word one here is neuter in gender, or literally, one thing. While it may not be John’s intention to assert oneness of essence between Father and Son, a deep unity is meant, and it certainly seems to mean more than oneness of will. For the Jews have thought such a claim was blasphemy.

Hoskins, one of the better interpreters, thinks not. What our Lord means it seems is an absolute unity. And if that is meant, then his deity is involved for it’s impossible to think of any person being perfectly at one with God in the exercise of the divine prerogatives, which are infinite, if he were not one with him in essence. That this is the correct sense of the text is plain when we look at the marvelous promises of verses 27 through 30. Only a God could say and guarantee these claims. Listen to them “And I give unto them eternal life and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand, my Father, which gave them me, is greater than all, and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father’s hand, I and my Father are one.”

A fourth text, this fourth text is a text over which there can be no doubt that it asserts the deity of Christ. It concerns Thomas, the disciple to whom less than full justice

has usually been done by the commentators. He is known as doubting Thomas, or even Thomas the skeptic. It is he who bravely said, however, when the other disciples protested that it was foolish to go up to Jerusalem, “Let us also go that we may die with him” John 11:16. If he doubted it was not the doubt of rebellious skepticism. In fact, it’s striking that doubting Thomas is the apostle who uttered the finest confession of faith in the New Testament. “At the climax of this gospel he,” as one of my old teachers said, “fought his way through the mists to the light of truth, sweeping the midnight of doubt from his soul, crying out triumphantly with his hands at Jesus’ side, ‘My Lord, and my God’” John 20:28.

About this confession of Christ’s deity, there can be no doubt, although one commentator reminds us that this is not the verdict of a theologian, but the reaction of a loving heart. The fact that John not only cites Thomas’ confession but makes it the climax of the argument of the gospel is the strongest indication that the apostle who wrote the book sided with Thomas. To the theologian who could argue that John did not think Thomas was uttering truth, we can only offer our Lord’s words to Thomas, “Be not faithless, but believing.” Those who like Thomas are convinced of his Godhood sing, “Oh that with yonder sacred throng, we at his feet may fall, join in the everlasting song and crown him Lord of all.”

Now let us turn to the testimony of another, who knew him as the risen Christ, the testimony of Paul. It’s clear that Paul thought that Jesus was God. We look at two texts, although there are many other references that might be turned up. First, there is the statement in the great kenosis passage which gives important insight into the union of the two natures in the one person, or the hypostatic union, to use the common theological term. There Paul says that “Jesus was in the form of God” Philippians 2:6. The term, form, in the Greek original, refers to the unchangeable essential nature of a thing. If one says that a person is in the form of man then what was meant was that he had the essential nature of manhood. A robin, a sparrow, a mocking bird, a wood pecker, have

the same form, they are all birds. They have different outward characteristics. The Greeks had another word to express these things, but they each have the same form. Thus, if Jesus is in the form of God, then he has all the essential attributes of deity, or all those characterizing qualities that make God, God. He who is in the form of God is God. What Paul says in the paragraph is that Jesus did not surrender his divine attributes, but the voluntary use of them. He surrendered the glories of deity, the prerogatives of deity, but not the deity itself. The reasons for the laying aside of what Milton called “the blaze of majesty” lie in the necessity of performing the Messianic mediatorial work in the power of the Holy Spirit as the God man. It was a necessary part of his humiliation.

A second text of Paul’s, in which he indicates that Jesus Christ is God, is Titus 2:13 where we read of the believer’s hope, “Looking for that blessed hope,” Paul says “and the glorious appearing of the great God and our savior Jesus Christ.” The rendering that I have just read, found in the Authorized Version, obscures the sense of the Greek text a bit. But it is caught clearly in the New International Version, which has, “While we wait for the blessed hope, the glorious appearing of our great God and savior, Jesus Christ.” That is as clear and definite as it can be put. There are other passages to which we might turn, such as Hebrews 1:8, 2 Peter 1:1, in both of which the deity of the Lord Jesus is plainly affirmed. We don’t have time to do that in this study.

Nathaniel Micklem, in a book called *Ultimate Questions*, made the astonishing claim that “the assertion Jesus is God is a shocking heresy.” On the contrary, it’s shocking heresy to deny it. And it is shocking to read such things from professing Christian leaders. In the Nicene Creed, accepted as Christian doctrine by Christian churches, the church has confessed it’s faith in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only begotten. That is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth, who because of us men and because of our salvation came down and became incarnate,

becoming man, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended to the heavens, will come to judge the living and the dead.

Let me summarize. The evidence of the Scriptures is that the Son possesses undiminished deity. Otherwise we can only conclude with many that he was either deceived, a megalomaniac, afflicted with folie de grandeur, as J.B. Phillips put it, or a wicked deceiver. Those who have believe in him, and enjoy the salvation he gives, have never been in doubt over this trilemma. There’s a marvelous statement from P.T. Forsyth that bears repeating, “Is it not equally true” he wrote, “that he thought of himself as in a category distinct from other men, whether we regard his relation to God or to the world? Where he came, salvation came. As to Zacchaeus, by his very presence, he stood between men and God, not with men before God. A word spoken against him was comparable however different to a sin against God’s Holy Spirit, for both were against God. They were not like sins against men. That is to say, he has to make his historic personality parallel with the Holy Spirit before he can set up the contrast, which is only effectual between beings of the same kind. He was greater than the temple” he said, “as no prophet could be. In the parable of the vineyard he is the only Son, the beloved, distinct from the messengers besides. He never prays with his disciples, much as he prays for them, and the Lord’s prayer was given by him but not used by him.” May I repeat that, “He never prays with his disciples, much as he prays for them, and the Lord’s prayer was given by him but not used by him.” Forsyth concludes, “There is a line between him and them, delicate but firm, often as fine as a hair, but always as hard as a diamond.” It’s hardly ever been said better.

So, for Ignatius of Antioch, who wrote just after the New Testament was concluded and spoke of “one physician who is both flesh and spirit, born yet not born, who is God in man” to Charles Wesley who taught us to sing, “Amazing love, how can it be, that Thou my God shouldst die for me.” We preach him as Thomas confessed him, “My Lord, and my God, unique, supreme, and sufficient.”

Dr. John Mott, a great missionary leader of a generation ago, commenting upon an exhaustive survey of the great non Christian faiths, done just before the World Missionary Conference in Jerusalem in 1928 said, “It was overwhelmingly proved that the more open minded, honest, just and generous we were in dealing with the non Christian faiths the higher Christ loomed in his absolute uniqueness, supremacy, and universality.” “There is no one else,” a prominent Hindu said to E. Stanley Jones, “who is seriously bidding for the heart of the world except Jesus Christ. There is no one else on the field.”

So we close this, the first of our studies, on who was Jesus Christ, with the challenge, what think ye of Christ? We wouldn't really be honest if we didn't try to make an application. Echoing the words of the Roman procurator we add, what shall I do then with Jesus, which is called the Christ? It is necessary that we make a decision. May the Lord God cause us to think over the testimony of the word of God and may the Lord God cause us to reflect upon these great challenges, what think ye of the Messiah? And then that more active one, what shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ? These two questions hound and haunt us until we respond. May God give us the grace to do that. For Jesus' sake.