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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Who Was Jesus Christ?

“Deity - Problems, Objections”

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] This is the third of our series of studies with the title “Who Was Jesus Christ?” New Testament scholars, and I have been one for over twenty-five years, occasionally say things that the average Christian believer finds it hard to comprehend. For example, a few years back a world famous New Testament scholar said, “We can, strictly speaking, know nothing of the personality of Jesus.” One might want to reply, “Has he not been reading the Bible, the scholarly literature? Where has he been studying, in Togo, or Lower Volta?” A contemporary Catholic scholar, the well known Hans Kung, in seeking to answer the question, “Who was Jesus Christ?” has concluded that Jesus did not assume any titles implying Messianic dignity, such as Messiah, Son of David, Son of God, or even Son. All these titles were given to him afterwards by the Christian community, he thinks. This is amazing, especially since there is no record of the church giving Jesus of Nazareth any title, beyond the days of the times of the early church but the title Redeemer. Did the church give him the many titles recorded in the New Testament and then suddenly suspend the practice? It’s not surprising that the Roman Catholic church has stripped professor Kung of his status as a Catholic theologian.

I have concluded from the previous two studies that Peter’s answer to the question, “Who was Jesus Christ?” is correct. He is the promised Messiah, the divine Son

of the living God. The reasons that support this conclusion are these. First, the texts of the New Testament support the teaching.

Second, indirect evidence from the New Testament, important because it does not represent an ideological attempt to prove his deity supports it. His everyday life and language indicate his deity. This evidence reaches its climax in the disciple’s worship of him. The worship of the carpenter lies back of all the theological terms and titles given him. This is all the more remarkable when one remembers the pietistic Judaism in which the disciples had been brought up. That would have caused them to rebel against the worship of our Lord naturally, but they felt compelled to do so. An irresistible compulsion from within through the Holy Spirit moved them to bow before him. To account for it the church was led to acknowledge his full deity.

Third, church tradition, seen in Nicea’s famous statement that he was “God of God, light of light, true God of true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things were made,” said it’s amen to the view. But surely one might say, “Arius, and other early churchmen, while judged heretical by the church were intelligent men, they claimed adherence to the Bible. They must have had some basis for their differences, must they not?” And to this we answer, “Certainly.” Let’s look at some of the text to which they appealed, and at some to which any objector might appeal. And we turn first to the problem of Mark 10:18, the context of the passage, first of all. The passage found in Mark 10:17-27 concerns the rich young ruler. It is a much misunderstood passage, some finding in it salvation by good works, others Unitarianism, and still others a confession of sin by Jesus. It really says none of these things.

Many Christians however, find it difficult to explain our Lord’s words to the young man. In fact a friend of mine now with the Lord, the first president of Grace Theological Seminary, in Winona Lake, Indiana, used to say that earlier in his study of Scripture he used to hurry past the passage as one does past a grave yard. Another interpreter has said that the passage contains three surprises; first that there could be a man who, as

Jesus claimed, lacked only one thing, second, the surprise that if his opinion of himself was valid, that he lacked anything, and third, the surprise that after his study of it he was ever surprised. The question of the young man was, “Good master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?”

Our Lord’s reply brings us to the problem. He responded to the young man, “Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is God.” Now what did he mean by that reply? Let’s look at the interpretation of the text then. The Arians contended the Lord repudiated the predicate good, thus rejecting full deity. Modern Arians have even contended that his reply was a confession of sin. “He was” they say, “only seeking to lead men to the perfect worship of God.” The context argues against the view. In fact, the 21st verse, with it’s “follow me” the words of Jesus to the young man, leads in a quite different direction. If he was confessing sin how could he say “follow me?”

There is another more convincing interpretation. The use of the pronoun, me, makes it clear that our Lord is calling the young man to a deeper consideration of himself. Further, the initial question of the ruler indicates he espouses an erroneous doctrine of salvation. Like the Pelagians, he thinks life comes from doing something. He does not really understand that apart from divine enablement sinful man cannot do anything that pleases God, see Romans 8:7 and 8. So our Lord will point him to the Mosaic Law, specifically the second table, designed by God to bring to men under it the knowledge of their sin

I therefore, with the early church fathers, such as Ambrose, Athanasius, Chrysostom, Jerome, and many modern commentators, believe the Lord’s question is designed to insight the young man, who had everything the world respects, to a deeper inquiry into both himself and the Lord of glory standing before him. The young man had used the adjective, good, of the Lord, but seems to regard him as a mere teacher. Jesus, seeing he does not realize who he is, questions the use of an adjective applied to a

person regarded by the ruler as a mere man. To call Jesus good, if he were simply an ordinary rabbi, is to misuse the adjective. If the young man had replied, “But Lord, I believe you are God” then Jesus might have replied to him, “I have not found so great faith in Israel. Believe in me and you shall inherit eternal life.” Inherit, that is, receive it as a gift. In a moment he demands of the young man, “Follow me.” That is the prerogative of God alone. No prophet ever presumed to say, “Follow me.” Even the great Samuel, remarkable for his integrity, did not suggest that others should follow him as his disciples. In fact, in that very passage in which his unshakable integrity is described, he calls upon Israel to turn not aside from following the Lord. In the Old Testament the concept, following, in a spiritual sense has as its object God himself. When Jesus called upon fellow Israelites to follow him, the implication was plain; he was claiming deity. Mark 10:18 is no denial of deity, nor is it a confession of sin. Look closer at what he said. He did not say there is none good but one that is the Father, but “God.” Jesus is not the Father. If he had said that, then good would not be applicable to him. He said “God,” a term applicable to the three divine persons of the eternal trinity. Good is properly applied to him when the user of the word knows who he really is, for he is God.

An illustration might help in grasping Jesus’ point. It is said that the emperor Joseph II of Germany often went incognito on extensive tours through his lands of Hungary, Bohemia, France, Spain, and Holland with his true identity unsuspected. Now it is plain that if he, while in disguise, his true position unknown, were to be offered by a subject of his realm the homage due only to the emperor, it would be an encouragement of treason. The fact that the person was in disguise was really the emperor would not make the homage a royal act while the subject was ignorant of his true identity. If on such occasions as the emperor’s tours, officers of state had breathed state secrets to him, they could’ve been arraigned for treason against the empire. Thus as long as the rich

young ruler did not know that Jesus was truly God it was really blasphemy to call him good.

Now there is another problem we want to look at. The problem of Mark 13:32, and first, just a simple word concerning the context. In the Olivet discourse Jesus related a parable concerning a fig tree, to urge his hearers to heed the signs of the events to come. In the midst of the parable are words that have puzzled many, “But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no not the angels which are in heaven neither the Son, but the Father;” Mark 13:32.

Now think of the interpretation of this text with me. First the statement does not stand alone, but is related to others in which he or others underline the genuine humanity of the Son. Ultimately the answer to the puzzle of the text is found in a theological question, since Jesus did not explain his words. The question is phrased by James Stoucker correctly, “How can the omniscience of the second person of the trinity be reconciled with the ignorance of Jesus?” The answer of course lies in the self humbling of the second person, as Paul points out in Philippians 2, verse 5 through verse 11. A careful reading of the statement will show that our Lord implies that he is not simply an ordinary man. Notice that his words distinguish four plains of knowledge; that of men, angels, the Son, and the Father. The order is an ascending one, and he puts himself above men and above angels, the highest of created beings.

Now if one should attempt to take the position that the Son is an intermediate being between angels and the Father, as the Arians seem to attempt, that impossible position is shown to be erroneous by the baptismal formula, where Jesus exhorts his followers to baptize in the name, singular, of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. There is an equality of persons there. But is there not some sense of subordination, suggested by the order of terms? Well yes, the subordination is that of the mediatorial mission, in which Jesus is engaged when he utters the statement. For that work and during that time he does subject himself to the Father’s will. As Vincent Taylor

has said, “Self limitation is an essential form of the divine manifestation. God is God when he stoops no less than when he reigns.”

Now our third problem is the problem of John 14:28, and let us look at the context of the text for a moment. In his upper room discourse Jesus prepared his men for the time when he would be absent from the physically. He comforted them, he consoled them, he exhorted them, and instructed them. In the paragraph in which this difficult text is found he dwelt on his return to the Father. He wanted them to understand what it meant to him to resume his place at the Father’s right hand. Appealing to their love for him he says they should be rejoicing over his return to the Father and rejoicing for him. When we think of the interpretation of the text we think of these things.

In the midst of this tender section is found the puzzling statement, “For my Father is greater than I” verse 28. In the light of this, did the church overstate itself in claiming that Christ was co-essential with the Father? Is subordinationism perhaps right after all? Now there are several things to bear in mind here. First, comparisons are properly made between things of the same nature. What kind of comparison can be judiciously made of apples and lawnmowers, if comparisons are made properly of things of the same species, then Jesus’ words suggest a unitive essence with the Father.

But second and more significantly, let us remember that what status Jesus had at the point of time that he made this statement. The superiority of the Father is mentioned while our Lord is involved in the Messianic, mediatorial work of offering the atoning sacrifice for sinners. The Son in his humiliation will through suffering make his way to the Father for glorification. Thus like the Arians, modern objectors to the deity of Christ often ignore the historical context of the statement. His time of mediatorial humiliation was a time when he was in submission to the Father. At that time it could be said correctly, as our Lord did say, “My Father is greater than I.” In that sense, he had ceased to be equal with the Father, for he had entered into a status lower than that which belonged to him by nature. He had become a man, a man who “hath told you the truth”

as he said, John 8:40. In this very context however, he says, “The prince of this world cometh and hath nothing in me.” No mere man could say that.

Third, it’s sometimes said that the statement relates to the humanity of the Lord alone. There is an element of truth in this, for our Lord did surrender the voluntary use of his divine attributes in the days of his flesh. But there is more to the matter than that. More to the point is it to say that the Son does not speak of his essence in the statement but of his office, namely, that of Messiah. He is the mediator, subordinate to the Father for a time. Paul spells out the details of this in 1 Corinthians 15:20-28. The Father, Jesus means, is greater in office and position during the mediatorial work. Confirming this is his careful use of terms. He says, “For the Father is greater than I” not “For God is greater than I.” The language is that of the kenosis, the self humiliation of the servant of the Lord until the mediatorial work is accomplished.

We often forget, my dear friends, how submissive the Lord Jesus was in his saving work. If this is true then our Lord might well have added, “When I return to the Father, and when the Messianic mission is finally completed in all its parts, then I will be greater than I am now, namely, as great as the Father.” From this we learn that absolute equality and relative inequality may co-exist. We should have known this all along.

One might imagine a business, owned equally by three brothers, yet with mutually agreed responsibilities. The brothers are equal in blood, education, relationships, and in stock ownership of the firm. They participate equally in the profits from the business, but by mutual consent, one assumes the executive responsibilities, another, the administrative and technical responsibilities, and the third, the marketing responsibilities. In this case, there is absolute equality and relative inequality, and there is no contradiction.

Similarly, in the relations between the Father, Son, and Spirit there is in the carrying out of the mediatorial mission absolute equality and relative inequality, and no contradiction. If we just remembered how important the mediatorial mission is in

understanding the life and works and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ, it would all be much plainer to us.

Now let me devote myself to a conclusion. Almost ten years ago John Hick, well known British philosopher and Christian teacher and preacher, now serving in the United States of America, edited a sensational but blatantly heretical book entitled *The Myth of God Incarnate*. This is not the place to review the weaknesses of the book, let’s just reflect on the consequences resulting from the discovery that the eternal Son, the second person of the trinity, did not assume human nature and enter into our world to accomplish our redemption. Among the dire consequences I’ll mention just three, but they are appalling to ponder.

First, we should have no knowledge of God. Only God can certainly make God known. Think about that for a moment. No prophet can, with certainty, make God known. No servant of the Lord can, with certainty, make God known. Only God can make God known. That of course is the ultimate reason for the incarnation. From the Lord Jesus we have learned as Michael Ramsey put it, “God is Christ like, and in him is no un-Christ likeness at all.” “Why should we not turn to one of the Hindu Avatars?” someone has said. But the word of God says, “No man hath seen God at any time, the only begotten Son which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.”
Hallelujah.

Second, we should have no atonement, for there would be no cross with the Son of God bearing the penalty for the sins of sinners. We thought Paul was right, we Christians, when he wrote, “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself.” But if there was no incarnation, Jesus was only a phantom and his story is a myth.

And finally, there is no hope of the resurrection of the body and of the defeat of death. We are of all men most miserable if Jesus is not the incarnate Son who rose from the dead. Bertrand Russell’s “sly dig” would make a point, “Belief in fairy tales is

pleasant.” The resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ how important that is, and how important is the incarnation in relationship to it.

On the other hand, if as the Scriptures say, as the gospels so plainly say, and as the apostle so fully explains in his letters, “Jesus is the incarnate Son of God, true God of true God” then we have the knowledge of God when we have the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. And we have an atonement that removes our sin’s eternal judgment when we have the Son of God dying upon Calvary’s cross. And in addition, we have a glorious hope of the resurrection of the body and life everlasting. The words of the divine Son, the one Hick smugly called, “a man of universal destiny,” cheer and gladden the hearts of the saints. “I am the resurrection and the life. He that believeth in me though he were dead, yet shall he live” and “whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die” John chapter 11, verse 25 and verse 26.

Well, I suppose that it would be very wrong to conclude a message on, who was Jesus Christ, without making an application. When one looks at the New Testament it’s evident that the preachers of the word of God from the Lord Jesus, through the apostles and others, applications were made. And so I think it would be wrong to conclude the message today without a reference to Jesus’ own stirring appeal to Lazarus’ sorrowing sister Martha. Following his claim that he is the resurrection and the life, he said to Martha, “Martha, believest thou this,” this appeal is my appeal to you who are listening, may the Lord in enabling grace cause you to respond as that remarkable and believing woman did, “Yea Lord, I believe that Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God, which should come into the world.” One of the remarkable things about the Scriptures is that when one makes a confession like this to the Lord, not to the church, not to the preacher, but to the Lord, genuinely from the heart, there is the gift of eternal life. For by grace are we saved through faith, that not of ourselves, it is the gift of God. That was what the rich young ruler needed to learn, that there is no way in which we can by doing something inherit eternal life. That is a gift of the grace of God. May God the Holy Spirit, who

alone brings men to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, move in your heart this lovely day, to rest upon the saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ for time and for eternity.

In our next study we’re going to look at the humanity of our Lord and then we’re going to ask the question, in the light of his deity and humanity, what is the resultant person, his makeup, his meaning, and the message to us. And we’ll seek to close the question, who was Jesus Christ, showing that he was truly the savior God man.