

I s J e s u s G o d ?

The Biblical Case for the Deity of Christ

Introduction by

Benjamin B. Warfield

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Introduction

This little volume offers a constructive argument for the deity of Christ. It owes its origin to an attempt by the members of a class in Princeton Theological Seminary during the session of 1911–1912—the Centennial Session of the Seminary—to give a reasoned answer to a series of inquiries. These, taken in sequence, raised the salient questions which everyone must face who undertakes to investigate historically the evidence for the deity of Christ.

These inquiries, in their order, were:

- Does the Christian Church teach the Deity of Christ?
- Has the Christian Church always taught the Deity of Christ?
- Do the New Testament writers teach the Deity of Christ?
- Do the Evangelists represent Christ as Himself teaching His Deity?
- Did Jesus teach His own Deity?

- Is Christ God?

A considerable number of essays were presented on each of these topics. Those here printed were selected because they seemed to fit well into one another, and together to present a solid argument for the ultimate conclusion. Naturally, the essays should be read consecutively and with regard to their relation to one another, that their force may be felt. As the importance of the topics increases progressively, it has been thought well, while but one essay is printed on each of the earlier, to print two on each of the later of them. This entails some slight repetition, but it is hoped will be found to add strength to the general presentation of the argument.

It is with great confidence that I place these essays by a company of earnest young men, seeking (and finding) the truth, before a larger public than that for which they were prepared, asking for them a candid—I scarcely need ask an indulgent—reading.

Benjamin B. Warfield

O N E

Does the Christian Church Teach the Deity of Christ?

by Rienk Bouke Kuiper

Before a satisfactory answer can be given to this question it is necessary to define some of its terms. Specifically, what is meant by “the Christian Church”? This does not mean the “holy catholic church” of the Apostles’ Creed which includes the whole body of Christ of all times and lands as one spiritual organism. Rather, our question is concerned *only* with the present. Again, we have to do with the Church in its visible aspect; because of our inability to say who are and who are not members of the invisible Church, we can successfully investigate the teaching only of the visible Church.

We must also here face the question which very naturally presents itself: Can a Church that denies the deity

of Christ be called Christian? It is evident that a negative answer to this question at this stage of the discussion would at once destroy the whole problem. For if only that Church which teaches the deity of Christ is truly Christian, then of course the Christian Church teaches the deity of Christ, or else there is no Christian Church. We are constrained therefore to take the term "Christian Church" simply in its conventional sense. It includes the whole body of those who are members of any institution called a Church which professes to be, not Jewish, Muslim, or pagan, but Christian.

The term "deity of Christ" must next be defined. There is little or no question as to what the earliest followers of Christ, the early Church, and in fact orthodox Christianity of succeeding times, have meant when the dogma has been confessed. What has been meant is clearly and unambiguously stated in the ecumenical creeds. It is confessed that Christ is the only begotten Son of God, his Son therefore in a sense in which no other being can possibly be called God's Son, perfect God, of the substance of the Father. To put the case briefly, the term deity of Christ in its historical meaning implies nothing less than the unity of substance of the Father and his Son Jesus Christ. He who accepts the deity of Christ in this sense confesses that Christ is God in that sense in which there is but one God. This meaning we shall attach to the term in the attempt to answer our question. We need not defend ourselves for so doing. On the contrary, anybody who

wishes to attach any other sense whatsoever to the term needs to defend his course of action. The phrase, “the deity of Christ,” has a historical meaning, and if anybody desires to deny the dogma in this sense and yet wishes to maintain it in a modified sense, he should, we believe, for the sake of veracity, invent another formula to give expression to his view of the person of Christ.

From what has just been said the transition to the problem proper is easy. There are theologians at the present time—not a few of them within the pale of the Church—who hold modified views concerning Christ’s deity or divinity, or possibly deny the doctrine altogether. In the Appendix to Hastings’ *Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels* A. S. Martin treats of “Christ in Modern Thought” and distinguishes between the Christ of speculation, the Christ of experience, and the Christ of history. The Christ of speculation is denied pre-existence, sinless birth, resurrection, divine authority and sole mediation. Yet he is called the Son of God, but in the same sense in which men are sons of God. The Christ of experience, to a large extent a product of the Ritschlian school, is admitted to be divine, but not in the old dogmatic sense. His divinity is said to consist in the fact that his will was in perfect harmony with God’s and that in the moral sphere he displayed the highest divine attributes. The Christ of history is much more openly denied all divinity. He is stripped of supernaturalism and all the emphasis is placed on his true humanity. The secret of his success is

said to lie in his psychological uniqueness, *i.e.*, in his unequalled goodness and greatness. But he is not divine. We cannot forbear calling attention here to some of the fine phrases which William Adams Brown uses in his *Essence of Christianity*, when he speaks of Jesus Christ as the central figure of Christianity. He calls God the Father of Christ, but only after he has called him the Father of us all in seemingly the same sense in the immediately preceding sentence.¹ Again he says, "Sonship takes on a larger meaning. . . . We still recognize man's littleness . . . but the recognition loses its terrors as in Christ we perceive what man may become." These words may be interpreted, no doubt, in an orthodox sense; but do they not tend greatly to obscure the uniqueness of Christ's Sonship?

Finally we must call attention to the Unitarian movement. The phrase "the pure humanity of Jesus" covers a variety of convictions. Some Unitarians are almost Trinitarians, approaching Christ on the divine side and affirming, though in an unorthodox sense, his pre-existence, uniqueness, sinlessness, etc. Others contemplate the human side, and believe that he was naturally born and endowed with qualities and gifts differing in degree and not in kind from those which all men enjoy. All this makes it clear that there are men today who deny the deity of Christ or accept the doctrine only in an unorthodox sense; and it is an undisputed fact that some of them are in the Church.

¹ p. 313.

The question now arises whether the teaching of these individuals or even groups can be said to be that of the Christian Church. We believe that the answer must be an emphatic negative. To substantiate our conviction we shall dwell first of all on the attitude of the Church toward deniers and modifiers of the doctrine of the deity of Christ, and thereupon call attention to the positive confession of Christ's deity by the Church.

First, attention must be called to the reaction among the theologians themselves against the denial of Christ's deity. We may refer here to such men as Kunze, Steinbeck, Braig, Hoberg, Weber, and Esser, A. M. Fairbairn, and Forsyth. After all, however, the teaching of the Church is not determined by a few theologians, but we must give heed to the expression of its faith by the Church as a whole, which includes comparatively unlearned men as well as theologians, laymen no less than the clergy. Now is the Church being influenced to any considerable extent by denials and modifications of the doctrine of Christ's deity? We believe not. Take for example the attempt to get at "the historical Christ." This example is a fair one for there are no truths which more readily gain assent or are more firmly retained than those of an historical order. Therefore also they are most within the grasp of the popular mind and can be expected to touch the instincts of popular faith. Has, then, the so-called historical Christ succeeded in displacing the so-called dogmatic Christ? Evidently not. The average church member of today, just as his father and grandfather,

still derives his view of the person of Christ from the writings of the Evangelists and the Apostles. Now it is precisely the integrity of the Gospels and Epistles as a reliable source of information and the validity of the claims which Christ made for himself which have been attacked by those who wish to present to us the real Christ of history. It is evident therefore that they have not persuaded the Church to take as much as the first step away from the supernatural Christ.

But neither has the Church lent its ear to those clever theologians who have tried and are trying to give a new meaning to the term, "the deity of Christ." The very fact that they are using old, well-established terms to introduce their new ideas may be called an admission on their part that they have not yet gained their point. It is a perilous undertaking to judge motives, but does it not seem that some present-day theologians are trying to gain acceptance for their views of Christ's person under cover of the term "divinity of Christ," just because they know only too well that in no other way will they ever succeed in introducing their ideas into a Church which still clings tenaciously to the true deity of Christ? And what, it may be asked, does the average church member know of a deity of Christ which is no deity but perhaps only a very high kind of humanity? Men are still too straightforward, too unsophisticated, to mean anything by the deity of Christ except that Christ truly *is* God.

And what is the Church's attitude toward Unitarianism? On more than one occasion when a gathering has been held of representatives of different Christian denominations, the Unitarians have been excluded because they deny the deity of Christ. In these cases the Church, at any rate some Churches, affirmed that denial of Christ's deity excludes from the Christian Church. In Hastings' *Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels* under the article "Divinity of Christ" the Unitarians are spoken of as deniers of the doctrine. The article concludes with these words: "Unitarianism has at all times failed to lead. The Church has never become a prey to the narrower reason and limited emotions of the Unitarian schools."

When we deny that the Church has been led to abandon the doctrine of the deity of Christ, we do not say that it does in every case reject false teachings on this point as vigorously as it should. If it did, there would not be a single individual in the Church who openly denies Christ's deity. It is indeed a deplorable fact that it is possible for men who do not believe in Christ's deity to retain their places in Christ's Church. We may not adopt the well-known device of the ostrich with reference to this fact, nor may we make light of it under cover of a superficial optimism. Still, though it may be, and is, true, that the Church should more eagerly oppose errors in this respect, it would be difficult to say how the Church could more clearly in a positive way affirm its belief in Christ's deity than it does. To this we now call attention.

The Christian Church—that is, Roman Catholic and Protestant—professes in the Apostles’ Creed to believe in Jesus Christ, the only Son of God the Father. In many parts of the Christian Church this creed is accustomed to be solemnly repeated on every Sabbath. Two things are here emphasized: that Christ is the Son of God, and that his Sonship is unique; specifically, that he is the Son of God in a sense in which no one else can be called a son of God. That he is the Son of God means, or is an equivalent way of saying, that he *is* God. We cannot dwell at length on the supernatural character of Christ which is strongly affirmed in the immediately following articles of this creed. Suffice it to say that it cannot be predicated of any being who is anything less than divine. Just think, for example, of the judgment of “the quick and dead” ascribed to him, which is the work of God alone. And what clear expressions of Christ’s deity are to be found in the Nicene and so-called Athanasian creeds, which though not so well known as the Apostles’, are yet recognized by many Churches as authoritative. Again how clearly Christ’s deity is affirmed in the separate creeds of the Churches, Reformed, Lutheran, and others. Nobody doubts this. In view of the confession of Christ’s deity in these creeds of parts of the Church and the clear confession of it by the whole Church in the Apostles’ Creed, it cannot be doubted that the Church teaches Christ’s deity.

But not only in its creeds does the Church confess Christ’s deity. It does so in its songs. It speaks thus:

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ, my God!²

And here especially does the unity of spirit of the whole Church of Christ appear. To quote Principal Fairbairn:

The high Anglican praises his Saviour in the strains of Luther and Isaac Watts, Gerhardt and Doddridge; the severe Puritan and Independent rejoices in the sweet and gracious songs of Keble and Faber, Newman and Lyte; the keen and rigid Presbyterian feels his soul uplifted as well by the hymns of Bernard and Xavier, Wordsworth and Mason Neale, as by the Psalms of David. And this unity in praise and worship which so transcends and cancels the distinctions of community and sect, but expresses the unity of faith and fellowship of heart in the Son of God.

Then think of the divine honor which the Church assigns to Christ. We shall mention but a few of the most apparent ways in which the Church honors Christ as God. It prays to him just as it does to the Father, and in doing so it assumes that he is omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent; in fine it ascribes attributes to him which manifestly belong only to God. Every time the benediction is pronounced upon the congregation the Church makes Christ equal to God. He is mentioned alongside of the

² Isaac Watts, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," 1707.

Father without a hint at subordination. Yes, “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ” is spoken of even before “the love of God the Father,” not, to be sure, because Christ is placed above the Father, but because he is not inferior to him. And whenever the sacrament of baptism is administered, the doctrine of the Trinity, which makes Christ the Son of God and therefore himself God, is pronounced over him who through baptism is declared a member of the Christian Church. Whenever therefore the Church receives a new member it confesses its belief in Christ’s deity.

And does not the Church finally confess that Christ is God when it teaches men to flee to him and in its prayers itself goes to him for the forgiveness of sins? To be sure we are accustomed, and rightly so, to ask God to pardon our sins for Christ’s sake, and even when we do this we confess that man cannot free himself from the guilt of sin, but that he needs the sacrifice of God’s own Son. But how much more emphatically does the Church confess its faith in Christ as God when it instinctively flees to him personally with its burden of guilt and urges others to do the same! For the doctrine that only God can forgive sins is not peculiarly Rabbinical or Jewish, it is rooted in the universal consciousness of man. Everybody who feels the burden of his sins weighing upon him instinctively flees to his God or his gods for deliverance. This applies to the pagan as well as to the Christian. And he cannot rest until he feels in the depth of his heart that God has declared him free from all guilt. The principle underlying the question of the Jews:

“Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mark 2:7) is correct, and everybody who knows what sin is, knows this also. Everybody therefore who asks Christ to forgive his sins thereby expresses faith in his deity. It is said that the Christian Church is tending to relegate dogmas to the background in favor of ethics and morality. This is true; and it is quite possible, and even likely, that this tendency will cause many to lose sight of the importance of Christ’s deity. We can safely even go so far as to say that it is already having this deplorable effect. This fact is indeed a sad one. Yet we need not be disheartened, for so long as the Holy Spirit truly convicts men of sin, they will feel the need of a divine Savior.

When Peter had confessed: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16), Jesus replied: “You are Peter, and on this rock will I build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matt. 16:18). These words of the Savior have to the present time not failed of fulfillment. The Church today believes and teaches the deity of Christ. The gates of Hades have not prevailed against it.

* * * E N D O F F R E E S A M P L E * * *