

The Deity of Christ

by William Jennings Bryan (1860—1925)

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When one considers that for nineteen hundred years the deity of Christ has been the cornerstone of the Christian church, it may seem strange to my readers that they need consider at this time the question: Was Christ God or just a man? But even a casual perusal of the pages of the religious press—not to speak of the secular press—will convince one that the issue between these two views of the Saviour is a very vital one.

There are in nearly all of the Bible-believing churches members, and even ministers—not many, but a few—who openly reject orthodox teachings in regard to Christ's personality. Besides those who boldly dissent, there is a still larger group of timid doubters who cling to the orthodox terms but give these terms an interpretation which destroys their meaning.

Take, for instance, the word divinity as used in describing the supernatural element of Christ. Until recent years, one claiming to believe in the divinity of Christ would be accepted without question as a real worshiper of the Master. But in recent times some who regard Christ as merely a good man and a great teacher, but entirely human, acclaim His divinity, explaining that He was divine in the sense in which all men have something of divinity in them.

The interpretation which they give to the word divinity robs Christ of His Lordship and makes Him differ from men in general only in the degree to which He approached the perfection of the Heavenly Father.

This, of course, opens the way to as many different valuations of Him as there are members of the dissenting class.

According to the extent of their own apostasy and the courage with which they announced their views, Christ has been described as "the perfect man," "the most perfect man," "a man of rare virtue," "an extraordinary man for His time," "a teacher of repute," and the like.

When once a follower of Christ departs from the highest conception of the Master, there is no logical stopping place until he reaches an entire repudiation of Christ as a supernatural being.

The only knowledge we have of Christ is found in the Bible, and a rejection of the Bible's description of Christ invalidates the authority of every mention of Christ and of every quotation from His words.

One does not care to be guilty of an absurdity, yet it is an absurdity to say, as some do, in substance: "While the Bible writers falsify the record of Christ's birth and Sonship, still I am willing to believe certain quotations from what Christ is reported to have said; and relying for my information upon these discredited authorities, I am inclined to think that Christ said some things which commend themselves to our judgment and are, therefore, wise."

Of what value is such an endorsement of Christ?

A few have been frank enough to carry their logic to its ultimate conclusion and classify Christ with ordinary men—even below many men prominent in history.

For instance, a book was published entitled *Confessions of an Old Priest*, in which the author denies that Christ was born of a virgin, that He spoke words of supernatural knowledge impossible for other men, healed lepers, restored palsied limbs, gave sight to the blind, raised the dead, and He Himself ascended from the tomb. He even goes so far as to say:

To the great treasure of human knowledge, it cannot be said that He (Jesus) added anything....In science, literature, government, economics, He seems to have been upon the same level as the average uneducated man of His time....He gave no counsel as to the right ordering of human affairs. He offers no cure or readjustment.

Proceeding, he asks, "Was He good?" and answers as follows:

As an example to copy, His manner of life will not serve....It does not furnish the material....I was driven to confess to myself that His teaching...not only could not but ought not to be followed.

This author thinks that the goal to which religion would seem to be moving is a church "freed from bondage to history, untrammelled by Scripture."

What a Postmortem Reveals

This author said publicly what many preachers and professing Christians say privately while accumulating the courage necessary to enable them to defy criticism and break with former religious associates.

As a postmortem examination often reveals diseases that were not suspected during the life of the deceased, so confessions, after the repudiation of religion, often disclose an attitude of mind and heart that was concealed from the public for many years.

It is easy to understand why one would hesitate to distress religious associates until his doubts became stronger than his former convictions. It is also easy to respect the honesty of heart of those who prefer to endure criticism and the loss of Christian fellowship rather than profess what they do not believe. But it is not so easy to excuse those who continue to call themselves Christians after they have rejected all that is essential in Christianity and still more difficult to justify those who attempt to deny to a majority of the church—a very large majority—the right to determine the church's position on matters of doctrine.

As *The Watchman-Examiner* said in an editorial: "The Bible and the Bible only can settle the questions at issue. Let fundamentalists and liberals come forth to battle armed with their Bibles."

Scripture Declares Christ's Deity

The Bible, from beginning to end, teaches the deity of Christ. In the Old Testament, His coming is foretold, and His divine character is plainly announced. Seven hundred years before His incarnation, Isaiah said He "shall be called...mighty God, The everlasting Father....Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end." Isaiah describes also the substitutionary atonement of the promised Messiah.

Matthew announces the virgin birth of Jesus, who was to "save his people from their sins."

Luke describes in greater detail the conception of Jesus by the Holy Ghost and says that "of his kingdom there shall be no end."

The Gospel of John begins: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God....And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us [men]."

We are also told that "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

John describes Him as "the only begotten of the Father" (John 1:14).

Paul describes Christ as "God... manifest in the flesh" (I Timothy 3:16). Paul also says of Christ:

"Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God:

"But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men:

"And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

"Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name:

"That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth;

"And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Philippians 2:6-11).

Again the great apostle says, "For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell" (Colossians 1:19) and "In him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily" (Colossians 2:9).

Christ laid claim to power that only God could possess.

In John's Gospel we read:

"Jesus answered....

"Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad.

"Then said the Jews unto him, Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham?

"Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am." (John 8:54-58).

Here we have His own declaration as to His existence with the Father before He took upon Himself the form of man and offered Himself a sacrifice for the sins of mankind.

At the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, the people recognized that He spoke "as one having authority, and not as the scribes."

This assumption of authority was manifest in all His utterances. From the very beginning He not only spoke with authority, but He exercised authority, driving the money changers out of the temple because

they had made His Father's house a den of thieves; casting out devils and rebuking the devilishness in man, as when He brought an indictment against those who "devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayer."

Christ and God Identical

He not only declared His pre-existence with the Father, but He identified Himself even more intimately with the Father, saying, "I and my Father are one" (John 10:30). And again: "That ye may know, and believe, that the Father is in me, and I in him" (John 10:38). We have His word for it that He revealed the Heavenly Father to man:

"If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also: and from henceforth ye know him, and have seen him.

"Philip saith unto him, Lord, shew us the Father, and it sufficeth us.

"Jesus saith unto him, Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? he that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, Shew us the Father?

"Believest thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father in me? the words that I speak unto you I speak not of myself: but the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works.

"Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me." (John 14:7-11).

"But Jesus answered them, My Father worketh hitherto, and I work.

"Therefore the Jews sought the more to kill him, because he not only had broken the sabbath, but said also that God was his Father, making himself equal with God.

"Then answered Jesus and said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise.

"For the Father loveth the Son, and sheweth him all things that himself doeth: and he will shew him greater works than these, that ye may marvel.

"For as the Father raiseth up the dead, and quickeneth them; even so the Son quickeneth whom he will.

"For the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son:

"That all men would honour the Son, even as they honour the Father. He that honoureth not the Son honoureth not the Father which hath sent him." (John 5:17-23).

That He has power to forgive sin is proven in Luke 5, verses 24 and 25:

"But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power upon earth to forgive sins, (he said unto the sick of the palsy,) I say unto thee, Arise, and take up thy couch, and go into thine house.

"And immediately he rose up before them, and took up that whereon he lay, and departed to his own house, glorifying God."

The omniscience of Christ is declared by Paul: "In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Colossians 2:3).

His immutability is asserted: "Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever" (Hebrews 13:8).

That Christ is to be the Judge of all, in Heaven as well as on earth, is the testimony of Paul: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ" (II Corinthians 5:10).

And also: "The Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom" (II Timothy 4:1).

He is to be worshiped as God: "Let all the angels of God worship him" (Hebrews 1:6).

Christ is to be glorified as God: "To him be glory both now and for ever" (II Peter 3:18); "With all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours" (I Corinthians 1:2).

The dead will rise at His call:

"Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live.

"...all that are in the graves shall hear his voice." (John 5:25,28).

Peter, in reply to the question, "Whom say ye that I am?" answers, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God"; to which the Saviour approvingly rejoins, "Flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven."

His Deity Establishes Our Duty

The church's commission—incomparably the greatest commission ever issued to any organization—could only have been announced by one of the Trinity.

"All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.

"Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:

"Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world." (Matthew 28:18-20).

These words were uttered by our crucified and risen Lord. He had passed through a sham trial and had been treated with a contempt seldom, if ever before, so despicably expressed; He had been mocked and jeered by those who believed Him to be merely a man—an incumberer of the earth at last removed forever; He had been crucified and buried; and then He had risen triumphantly from the grave and had appeared to His disciples and to others. This was His final communion with His followers.

His claim to power was without limit; His Gospel was for every human being; baptism was to be in His name also; His words were to live—every word—and be taught to everybody; He promised to be with His people always, even unto the end of the world; and in His hands was all the power in Heaven and earth.

True or False?

Christ's claims to divinity were either true or false; there is no middle ground. It is not a question of interpretation, for the language is clear and unmistakable.

Robert E. Speer says:

The question of the deity of Christ is the question of the truth or falsehood of Christianity. Either Jesus was divine, God and man in one historic personality, or He was merely a man.

Was He an impostor? If so, He was the greatest impostor of all time. Think of it; an unlettered Galilean peasant perpetrating so stupendous a fraud for nearly twenty centuries on so large a fraction of the most intelligent of the world's population!

Not an Impostor!

It is impossible that He should be thought an impostor. Even the Jews who rejected Him do not call Him an impostor; they think Him "deluded."

The book *Jesus, the Jew*, contains the following passage:

Yet, these things apart, who can compute all that Jesus has meant to humanity? The love he has inspired, the solace he has given, the good he has engendered, the hope and joy he has kindled—all that is unequaled in human history.

Among the great and good that the human race has produced, none has even approached Jesus in universality of appeal and sway. He has become the most fascinating figure in human history. In him is combined what is best and most enchanting and most mysterious in Israel—the eternal people whose child he was.

The Jew cannot help glorying in what Jesus thus has meant to the world; nor can he help hoping that Jesus may yet serve as a bond of union between Jew and Christian, once his teaching is better known and the ban of misunderstanding is at last removed from his words and his ideal.

But could honest delusion produce a character who, in "the love he had inspired," "the solace he has given" and "the hope and joy he has kindled" is "unequaled in human history"?

No, it is impossible to conceive of such a character acting under a delusion. If that were possible, then delusion would be a happier state than reason can create.

King of Kings!

But if not an impostor and if not deluded, how shall we explain Christ? As "King of Kings, and Lord of Lords," as "the only begotten Son of God" who came down to earth and became flesh, suffered in man's stead that man might be redeemed from the Fall, and is now at the right hand of God as man's Intercessor.

Does it make any difference to the church whether it shall preach Christ, the Son of God, or Christ, the son of Joseph?

Yes, the same difference that there is between an infinite God and finite man. If Christ were but a man, He was but one among millions, and that, too, handicapped by false pretense if He were an impostor or

by an inexcusable mistake if He were deluded. But if Christ was as the Bible proclaims Him to be, a part of deity, separated from the Father for a few brief years and now reigning with God through eternity, He stands alone among the leaders of men and is the only Saviour as well.

Is it material to the church what its doctrine is to be on this subject? Yes, it determines whether the church is to be a stagnant pool or a living spring—a fountain that pours forth a refreshing and invigorating flood of "the water of life."

A pool is a pool because it receives from the sloping sides around it and gives forth nothing. A spring is a spring because it is connected with a source that is higher than itself—it is just an outlet for the waters that flow through it from above.

Can there be any doubt as to the effect upon the church of an abandonment of the Bible's view of Christ?

It is not a matter of prophecy; it is a matter of history. There have always been a few who tried to exalt the human side of Christ while rejecting the divine side, but they have made no headway. Such a doctrine has furnished a refuge for some dissenters who were reluctant to give up Christ entirely, but there has been no propaganda in such a doctrine. It does not beat back the boundaries of heathenism or stir men to the sacrifices that are necessary to the spread of religion.

The story of Jesus, the Son of God, has been translated into every tongue and has been read as if it were actually spoken in the language in which it is read. The story of a man-child named Jesus, if just a worker of magic or a self-deceived visionary, would not have survived the generation in which He lived.

To be a living, vital force, a civilizing influence and a spiritual power, we must be true to the Christ of the Bible. Apostasy means death to the church and despair to civilization, for civilization finds its only hope in the regenerating power of the blood that flowed from Calvary and in the illumination that comes from the Heaven-born wisdom of "the only begotten Son of God."

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