

STUDY SIX

The Person of Christ-1

INTRODUCTION

We have seen the acts and events of Christ, with as little interpretation as possible. Yet to be true to the Scriptures, these events are seen to be significant and their significance is emphasised. For this reason we need to understand what the events mean. We must understand the work of Christ. It would be good if we could clearly divide our studies into two sections, one on the person of Christ and the other on his work, but the person and the work are so much the one that this is difficult. We can only try to make this division for ease in study, but the two sections will necessarily overlap and interweave. Firstly we will attempt to say something on the person of Christ.

THE PERSON OF CHRIST

We need to study his person as it is indicated in the pre-creational era, as it relates to creation, and then as it relates to the times and actions of the Old Testament period. The next natural division will be his work from incarnation to

the ascension, and finally his work now, until the parousia, and then on into eternity. Something of all these eras is communicated to us through the Scriptures.

His Pre-Creational Being

We must be clear. There was no Messiah, as such, before Jesus was baptised, anointed with the Spirit, and attested by the Father. If he was anything he was Messiah-elect, prior to his baptism.

In the New Testament there are two terms given to the one who later became incarnate as Jesus: (i) 'the Word'; and (ii) 'the Son' (see John 1:1–14; Heb. 1:2–3). Colossians 1:13–20 infers 'the Son' as a term (v. 13) by using it in reference to his saving work on earth. It then continues to refer to him without any special term. The two terms 'Word' and 'Son' refer to him prior to creation, or being there when creation began.

In Ephesians 1:3–10 the plan of God to choose His elect in Christ is clearly set forth. Whilst it does not actually state that he was there with the Father before time, it is reasonable to assume this was the case. In John 17:5, 24 Jesus states that he was with the Father before the world was created. Also, as we have said, the passages of John 1:1–3, Hebrews 1:2–3 and Colossians 1:15–17 (cf. 1 Cor. 8:6) make it clear that the Word, or Son, was prior to creation and therefore could be the mediator of creation.

Little is said as to his state of being. If we accept his eternal Sonship, and that he was there at the beginning so that the beginning could come to be, then he could have had nothing less than deity, and this is implied in certain prophecies concerning his coming, as also in the famous *kenosis* passage of Philippians 2:5–11.

Mediator of Creation

John 1:1–3 makes it clear that nothing was created apart from him. This is also shown in Colossians 1:15–17, and no less in Hebrews 1:2–3. First Corinthians 8:6 (cf. Heb. 2:10) makes it clear that the Father was the Initiator of creation, and His Son the Mediator of creation. In Hebrews 1:2 and Colossians 1:17 the Son upholds the universe or creation by the word of his power. In him all is integrated, subsists and coheres. The term ‘Word’ or *Logos* has been described as ‘the Expression’; that is, he expresses God. John 1:1–2 makes it clear that the Word was God, but that God was not the Word. Only he who is God can truly ‘express’ God. However, the Expression and God cannot be one, although in another sense *Logos* and God are one. This is resolved if we use the terms ‘Father’ and ‘Son’, and probably from John 1:14 (cf. v. 18) this is permissible.

Since the statements that all things exist in the Son or the Word are true, then Ephesians 1:9–10 is consistent, in that at the end-time, all things will be perfectly one in him, the Mediator of creation, who now however, is known as Jesus Christ the Son of God.

When we view such a work as creation then we are greatly informed as to the Person of Jesus Christ.

God Become Man: The Incarnation

There never was, as such, a Jesus Christ before the birth at Bethlehem. There was the eternal Son, the living Word. This Word became flesh. The inspired words of the New Testament, good as they are, have to seek to communicate that which is unique—God becoming man.

Philippians 2:5ff., and 2 Corinthians 8:9 give us a picture of wonderful humility in that the eternal Son becomes human. The incarnation is never looked upon in the Scriptures as an end in itself, but as purposive of God's soteriological plan.

In seeking to explain the incarnation to Mary, the angel said, 'You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High . . . and of his kingdom there will be no end . . . The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you: therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God' (Luke 1:31–33, 35). In Matthew 1:20–23 Joseph is informed as to the nature of the birth: 'that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit'. This leads us on to the question which is not an easy one to handle, namely the deity and humanity of the person Jesus Christ.

His Deity

There have been attempts to prove that Jesus had deity (and so was God) by showing some of the remarkable things that he did, such as raising people from the dead, and some of the great nature miracles. What makes such a proof difficult is that he said to his disciples, 'The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the *Father who dwells in me does his works*'. He then added, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and *greater works than these will he do*, because I go to the Father'. Whilst without doubt the greater works are done by believers in Christ (Christ being in the Father), nevertheless it shows that it is scarcely by works that Christ's deity is proved.

It is better to start from his origins. Philippians 2:5f., as also John 1:1–3, indicate that the Word or the Son was with the Father, prior to incarnation. It is the *relationship* the Father and the Son have which makes for Christ's deity. The *Logos* cannot but be God, otherwise he is on another level, and in that full sense cannot *express* Him. When he says, 'I and the Father are one', he is saying more than, 'We are at unity'. Jesus' enemies took this to mean he made himself as God (John 10:30, 33).

When John says, 'The Word became flesh', he has already indicated that the Word was God. Many times he uses the term 'sent', meaning that the man Jesus who was sent, was made flesh. He was not, however, flesh before he was sent. What then was he? Other passages in John's Gospel indicate he was with the Father, face to face with Him, and that he descended (having been sent) into the human scene (for example, John 1:1; 8:13–14; 5:24, 37).

In the same way, Paul speaks in Ephesians 4:9–10 of Christ having first descended from heaven. In Galatians 4:4–6 he speaks of God sending forth (*exapostello*) His Son from heaven. In Romans 8:3 he speaks of God 'sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh'. Therefore the origins of this man conduct us to his true nature. Below we will deal with the fact of the humanity of Jesus, but here we see that having come from heaven, from the Father, he is either simply a creature above all others, unique but not having deity, or he is one who has a unique relationship with the Father, and is in fact His Son. Thus, being uniquely Son, he has deity.

Two terms indicate deity in the New Testament, although both terms can be also used for persons who are less than divine. It is the context or contexts in which the words are used which generally denotes their 'high' or

'low' use. John, for example, uses the term 'Son of God' (1:34, 49; 10:36; 11:27; 20:31). This goes very close to Matthew 16:16 (cf. 26:63), 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God'. Not 'Christ *and* the Son of God', but 'Christ, the Son of God', where the two terms are virtually synonymous.

Paul has a somewhat different usage, although he certainly uses 'Son of God'. He speaks of Christ as Lord. This is seen in Acts 2:36, 10:36 and similar passages, where the cross and resurrection do not so much *make* as *prove* that Jesus is Lord. The term 'Lord' can certainly be used even for a leader or a teacher, but the nature of its use in Acts, the Epistles and the Revelation is for one on the level of deity. In this way it was used for God in the Old Testament.

There are, of course, Scriptures which add up into a strong witness that he was not only man, and was in fact God. These are John 1:1, 18; Romans 9:5; Philippians 2:6; Colossians 2:2–3, 9; 1 Timothy 3:16; Titus 1:3f.; Hebrews 1:8–9; 2 Peter 1:1; 1 John 5:20. Each of these seems capable of variable translations, some which underline the fact that Christ is God, and other possible translations which show it as otherwise. Second Peter 1:1 seems undeniable—'the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ'. Likewise Thomas's ascription in John 20:28, 'My Lord and my God!' although primarily a devotional and not an intentionally theological statement, surely echoes the mind of the early church. In fact it is the *sum total* of his actions, his relationship with his Father, and his accomplishments which show us that Christ has deity.¹

¹ The subject of Christ's deity is quite complex, as it is also profound. We have not even asked the question, ontologically, 'What is deity?' We

His Humanity

Here we are on simple if unusual ground. It is simple because all who saw him believed he was a man. This comes through time and again, both by what people said of him and the way he lived. True, they said, 'Never man spoke like this man!' but they meant he was still a man. 'Is not this the son of Joseph?' meant they saw him as man. At the best they said, 'He claimed to be the Son of God', but they did not believe he was. They saw no deity concealed under his humanity.

The normal ways of showing his humanity are to point out that he became weary, thirsty, hungry, that he laughed, wept, slept, talked, in fact had what we call human faculties and experiences, and of course this is right. What is often missed is that in fact he did things beyond what men normally do, but which are still human things. Peter is careful to point out that because of the anointing, Jesus of Nazareth does remarkable things, 'doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil'.

Hence we say he was truly man, rather than merely describe him as 'sinless', and 'perfect'. It is true he was sinless and perfect, but it is better to describe him as true man, rather than 'special'—or 'super'—man.

We do not have to prove his humanity, but we have to see that Jesus Christ came in the flesh, that is, that he was not the appearance of man, or that at some time he ceased

have assumed there is such a thing, and this because, as we read the Scriptures, we have revelation of Godhead Himself. For further treatments read: William Barclay, *Jesus as They Saw Him: New Testament Interpretations of Jesus* (SCM, London, 1962), pp. 20–38; J. D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity* (SCM, London, 1977), pp. 45–50; and relevant sections of H. P. Liddon, *The Divinity of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*.

to be man, or ever will cease to be man. Below we will discuss briefly the manhood and the deity of Christ in co-existence, but here we must stress that the Word became flesh, and that he was made in the likeness of sinful flesh (John 1:14; Rom. 8:3). Notice that he was not made in the likeness of flesh, or he would not have been man, but only the likeness. The 'likeness' was of *sinful* flesh. He was not made *in* sinful flesh, for then he would have been as fallen as others, but he was made to be as those who were fallen and sinful. This is more fully described in Hebrews 2:11–18 where he is said to be a partaker in human flesh, and to suffer its weaknesses. The likeness of sinful flesh then does not let him out of what being human is, even with the results of the sinfulness of man. Yet, uniquely he is not sinful. Tempted he is, and really tempted, but 'without sin'.

Positively, 'without sin' must mean that he was always willing to obey the Father's will. He was not just 'sinless' but 'obedientful'!

The One Who Is Both God and Man

With his origins, his actions, and the ascriptions his people give to him, this one must have deity. 'Have deity' is just a limited, human, and curious way of speaking. He was always God, but in the *kenosis* (Phil. 2:5ff.) something happened. It has been variously described and some of the descriptions must be wrong. The statement '[He] emptied himself' of Philippians 2:7 has been taken to mean, 'emptied himself of his deity'. This of course would be impossible. Hence others have said 'divested himself of the powers and prerogatives of Godhead'. This could scarcely be so, since he must still uphold all things by the word of his power, and in him all things must cohere. He

cannot abdicate that. Others see it that he simply did not use these attributes to assist his living as a man. In this sense he was truly man and did not have ‘an edge’ on the remainder of humanity. Others see it as meaning he acted as though he did not have the divine attributes. Almost all explanations have something deficient. The context of Paul’s statement is not strictly theological in that he was not trying to describe some esoteric truth of a great event. Rather he is using Christ’s humility as an example for us to follow. We too are to exercise humility. We are to ‘do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility [are to] count others better than yourselves’. This was what Christ was about. *He was being as us, no matter how it was done.* Someone quoted a poet as saying, ‘He (Christ) walked as though he were Godhead *deposed*’, but it is better to say, ‘He walked as though he were Godhead *exposed*’. Some have spoken of this as the ‘divine condescension’ or the ‘divine humiliation’. There is a vast difference between humiliation and humility. God, rightly understood, is the True Servant. He has served (and does serve) in creation, redemption, and the final restitution of all things. Hence his ‘emptying’ (i.e. the ‘emptying’ of the Son) is not leaving him empty and so incapable for service, but rather makes his service full because he truly serves as man, albeit he does not lose or abandon his deity. The best we can say is that his deity co-exists with his humanity, but his humanity is not one whit the better or the worse because of this. He is truly God. Yet also, he is truly man.

The *modes* in which he does this are beyond us. It is simply that he never calls upon his innate deity to fulfil his manhood. He calls upon God the Father. He relies upon the Spirit. So must we if we will fulfil our humanity.

THE PERSON OF CHRIST