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WHAT IS THE DEITY OF CHRIST?

WE have been talking about the great mystery of the Trinity. We have seen that according to the Bible there is but one God but that that one God is in three persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. There are some places in the New Testament where all three persons of the Godhead are mentioned in the same verse. But much the more important or extensive part of the Biblical proof of the doctrine of the Trinity is found in those passages where parts of the great doctrine are so mentioned as that when they are put together the completed doctrine inevitably appears. I want to begin to talk to you today about one great central part of the doctrine. I want to talk to you about the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But before I can say a single word to you about the deity of Christ, I must tell you what that term "the deity of Christ" means, or rather I must make perfectly clear to you what it does not mean. I must make perfectly clear to you the fact that the term "deity of Christ" and the assertion "Jesus is God" are often so employed today as to mean something quite contrary to the Bible and to the Christian faith.

Do you not see, my friends, that when a man says he believes in the deity of Christ, or when he says he believes that Jesus is God, the significance of such assertions depends altogether upon the question what the man who makes them means by the term "deity" or the term "God."

If a man has a low view of deity, then, when he says that he believes in the deity of Christ, that means that he has a low view of Christ; and if he has a low view of God; then, when he says that he believes that Jesus is God, that means that he has a low view of Jesus.

But here is where the confusion comes in. A Christian man, hearing some unbeliever say that he believes in the deity of Christ or believes that Jesus is God, attributes to that unbeliever the *Christian* definition of the term "deity" or the term "God." He simply assumes that the term "deity" or the term "God" means what Christians have always taken those terms as meaning. That is, he assumes that those terms refer to a personal God, Creator and Ruler of the world, separate by a mighty gulf from all finite things. The consequence is that he is very much impressed when those terms are used about Jesus by a man who otherwise seemed to be very far from the Christian faith. "Did you not hear that man say," he exclaims, "that he believes in the deity of Christ; did you not hear him call Jesus 'God'?" Well, if he believes in the deity of Christ, if he is willing to call Jesus 'God,' he cannot be so very wrong. He may be unorthodox in some particulars, but surely the root of the matter must be in him."

When I hear Christian people talking in that fashion about one of the noted unbelievers of the day, I have the sad feeling that those Christian people are, if I may use plain language, being deceived.

I am not a bit ashamed of laying stress upon this point, because I think it is a matter of profound importance. If I were sure I could get it really straight in your minds I should think it worth while to devote not merely a part of one lecture to it, but a whole series of lectures. The more I look out upon the condition of the Church, the more I am convinced that untold harm is being done by this double use of the term “deity” and of the term “God.” The willingness of unbelievers to use the terms in *their* sense, coupled with the proneness of Christians to understand them in theirs, is causing the great issue in the Church between Christianity and unbelief to be obscured. What is the result? The result is that the Church is being undermined from within. Christian people are being lulled to sleep by this use of orthodox terminology. Unbelievers are quietly gaining control. The young people of the Church are being trained up in unbelief. Precious souls are being destroyed.

What ought we to do in such a situation? I will tell you what we ought to do, my friends. We ought to seek light, and we ought to pray God for light. We ought to pray God that people may cease to be satisfied by a word, but may insist on looking at the meaning of the word.

Now the Christian meaning of the term “deity of Christ” is fairly clear. The Christian believes that there is a personal God, Creator and Ruler of the universe, a God who is infinite, eternal and unchangeable. So when the Christian says that Jesus Christ is God, or when he says that he believes in the deity of Christ, he means that that same person who is known to history as Jesus of Nazareth existed, before He became man, from all eternity as infinite, eternal and unchangeable God, the second person of the holy Trinity.

Very different is the use of the term “deity of Christ” or the term “God,” as it is applied to Jesus by many leaders in the modern Church.

You can tell that they are using the term in some sense entirely different from the Christian sense because of the things that they say about Jesus in detail, or, even more, because of the things that they will *not* say. They will not say that Jesus was born of a virgin. They will not say that He worked miracles. They will not say that the things that He said were always true; they will not say that He died as our substitute on the cross; they will not say that He rose from the tomb on the third day. Yet, they say, He was God.

When they say He was God, are they saying something orthodox? Is that orthodox assertion of theirs to be put to their credit over against the unorthodox assertions that they have made?

We answer: “No, a thousand times no!” When these men say that they believe in the deity of Christ or that they believe Jesus is God, that is not the most orthodox but the least orthodox thing that they say. It is an orthodox and a blessed thing to say that the

Jesus of the Bible is God; but to say that this poor deluded enthusiast of modern reconstruction is God is horrible blasphemy. How low these men must think of God if they can use His name in that way!

But in what sense do these men use the term “God” or the term “deity” when they apply it to the purely human Jesus—their purely human Jesus whom they have reconstructed after their rejection of the New Testament account?

Sometimes they mean by calling Jesus God merely that they try to enter into the same religious experience as the religious experience of those who in past generations called Jesus God. In the creeds of the Church, they say, Jesus is called God. We do not believe, they say, that He is God in the sense in which the authors of those creeds believed it. Shall we then cease to use the creeds? Not at all, they say. When the authors of the creeds called Jesus God, they were expressing in the language of their day a very precious experience which we also can share. So, they say, we can use the creeds still. We do not, of course, take them literally. But we can use them as expressions of the historic faith of the Church. We can still hold to the underlying spiritual meaning of the doctrines that they contain—including the doctrine of the deity of Christ.

Such repetitions of the creeds and such professions of belief in the deity of Christ are doing untold harm in the Church today. No doubt they are comforting to the men who practise them. I have sympathy with those men. To those men this use of traditional terminology seems like the stained glass in an old cathedral. It puts everything in a sort of dim religious light; it seems to impart a solemn glow of sanctity to what would appear to be bald unbelief if it were viewed in the cruel light of day.

But the trouble is that ordinary people in the Church are being deceived. They hear a man repeating the creeds. He seems to be repeating them with the utmost fervor. He is particularly fervent in expressing his belief in the deity of Christ. They simply assume that he means by the deity of Christ what people have always meant by it. So they tolerate him in the Church and put him in a position of authority. Time goes on. Many such men are put into positions of greater and greater authority. They undermine the faith of the Church, partly by their words, but more particularly by their silence. A deadly vagueness gradually affects the Church’s witness. The young people of the Church are not soundly indoctrinated. People do not know what is wrong, but the Church loses its power. Finally, the mask is thrown off. The people who really believe in the Bible and in the creed of the Church and who are dead in earnest about that belief are treated as troublemakers. The Church sinks down into a merger with the world.

That has been the process in many Churches of our day. But it is not in that way that we believe in the deity of Christ. When we say we believe in the deity of Christ, when we repeat the great creeds, we are not just using a form of words that meant something to somebody of long ago. No, we are saying something that we do honestly hold ourselves to be true. We are not just giving expression to the historic faith of the Church, but we are giving expression to *our* faith. We are saying that the historic faith of the Church is what we ourselves believe.

But aside from a merely traditional use of ancient terms, what is the actual meaning attributed to the terms “deity” and “God” by those who have given up the meaning that is found in the Bible and in the great creeds of the Church? What do modern unbelievers mean by speaking of the “deity of Christ” and what do they mean by calling Jesus “God”?

I think a twofold answer will have to be given to that question. Unbelievers who use the term “deity of Christ” and the term “God” as applied to Jesus mean usually one or the other of two things by those terms.

In the first place, some of them use the terms in what may be called a pantheizing sense. That is, they are willing to call Jesus God because they hold that all of us are God. They put only a difference of degree and not a difference of kind between Jesus’ deity and ours. God, they say, is not a far-off God. His life pulsates through the life of all the world. He has always been incarnating Himself in men and women. At one point He incarnated Himself with particular fulness— namely, in Jesus of Nazareth. But that incarnation was not different in kind from the incarnation in other men. It was different in degree but not in kind. What is revealed by the appearance of such a man as Jesus on the earth is that God and man are essentially one.

It is needless to say that that view of the deity of Christ is just about the diametrical opposite of the Christian view, which the Bible teaches. According to the Bible, what is revealed by the appearance of Jesus upon the earth is not that God and man are one, but rather that God and man are not one. God is God and man is man. There can be no confusion between the two. Moreover, man is separate from God by the awful abyss of sin. Hence—just because of that separation between God and man—the eternal Son of God, Second Person of the holy Trinity, took upon Himself our nature, by an act that was done not many times but once and once only, and so because of that one act “was, and continueth to be God, and man, in two distinct natures, and one person, for ever.”

I am not going to try to speak today of the relation between the divine nature and the human nature in the person of Christ. That belongs to a later talk in this series, or rather to a talk in some subsequent series. But what I want now to do is simply to say that the words, “Jesus is God,” have no real meaning, certainly no Biblical or Christian meaning, unless they go with the supplementary belief that *we* most emphatically are *not* God.

In the second place, other unbelievers use the terms “deity of Christ” or the term “God” as applied to Jesus in what may be called an anti-metaphysical or positivistic sense. I trust you have some spirit left in you when I use words as long as those. I do not expect all of you to understand that word “positivistic” right at the start, but I do hope to make you understand the thing that I mean by that word. I mean to designate by it the view of people who regard the human life of the man Jesus as the only God that they know. People used to believe, they say, that there is a personal God, Creator and Ruler of the world. But we no longer believe that—at least we are quite uncertain about it. It belongs to the realm of metaphysics, which is a very doubtful realm. The only things that we can be really certain about are the things that we can see and hear, the things that are found

here in this world in which we live. So if we are to have a God, a modern God, we must find Him here in the midst of us—here in this plainly visible realm.

Now we want to find a God, say the men of this way of thinking. People who used to believe in that old metaphysical God, Maker and Ruler of the universe, had something that we are in danger of losing. They had religion. They had a Being who could call forth ennobling emotions of reverence and awe. We need those emotions. We need something to call them forth. We need something to worship.

Where shall we find something to call forth these emotions? Where shall we find something to worship? Where shall we find an adequate object of religious devotion to take the place of that personal Creator in whom we no longer believe? We must find it here upon this earth, say these people of whom we are now speaking. Where then shall we find it?

Why, we find it, they say, in the life of a certain man named Jesus. He was not of course the Creator of the world. He was a man like the rest of men. But His moral life can call forth the same reverence as past generations used to give to the supposed Creator of the world. So although metaphysics is gone religion remains. Men used to have the ennobling emotion of reverence as they turned to the starry heavens and said: “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork” We no longer believe all that. But we can experience those same ennobling emotions by contemplating the human life of the man Jesus.

Such is a very common view of what men call “the deity of Christ.” What shall we say about that view? What shall we say about that way of worshiping Jesus? I will tell you what I think we ought to say about it. I think we ought to say about it that it is a terrible sin.

Please do not misunderstand me. It is not a sin to worship Jesus. On the contrary, it is the highest and noblest privilege and duty ever given to man. It is not a sin to worship the real Jesus. It is not a sin to worship the Jesus who is God and man. But it is a sin to manufacture a Jesus who was man only and not God, and then after you have manufactured that purely human Jesus to bow down and worship Him.

Do you not see what that kind of worship of the moral life of a supposedly purely human Jesus, a Jesus who is regarded merely as the ideal man—do you not see what that worship of such a purely human Jesus really means? It means that the man who engages in it has committed the ancient and terrible sin of worshiping humanity. It means that he has worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, and that is a sin indeed.

The upshot of what I have been saying is this—that when men today say that Christ is God they often do so not because they think high of Christ but because they think desperately low of God.

That is not at all the way in which the Bible says that Christ is God. When the Bible says that Christ is God, it does not do that by dragging God down. It does not ask us to forget a single thing that it has said about the stupendous majesty of God. No, it asks us to remember every one of those things in order that we may apply them all to Jesus Christ.

The Bible tells us in the first verse that God in the beginning created the heaven and the earth. Does it ask us to forget that when it tells us that Jesus Christ is God? No, it asks us to remember that. It says of Jesus Christ: "All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made."

The Bible tells us that God is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable. Does it ask us to forget that when it tells us that Christ is God? No, it tells us to remember that. "I am Alpha and Omega," says Christ, "the beginning and the end, the first and the last." "Before Abraham was, I am." "In the beginning was the Word." "He is before all things, and by him all things consist."

The Bible tells us that God is holy. Does it ask us to forget that when it tells us that Christ is God? Let the whole New Testament give the answer.

The Bible tells us that God is mysterious. Does it ask us to forget that when it tells us that Christ is God? No, it tells us that there are mysteries in Christ which only God can know. No one knoweth the Son but the Father, says Jesus, as no one knoweth the Father but the Son.

The Bible tells us that God is the final judge. Does it ask us to forget that when it tells us that Jesus is God? No, Jesus Himself said, in the Sermon on the Mount, that He would sit upon the judgment throne to judge all the earth.

Everywhere it is the same, my friends. The Bible from Genesis to Revelation presents a stupendous view of God, and then it tells us that Jesus Christ is all that God is.

What interest has the Christian man in all that? What interest has the Christian man in knowing that Jesus Christ is very God, what interest in knowing that it was through Him that the worlds were made, what interest in knowing that He pervades the remotest bounds, what interest in knowing that He is infinite in knowledge and in power?

No interest, say modern unbelievers; these things are mere metaphysics.

Every interest, say Christians; these things are the very breath of our lives.

We have trusted in Jesus. But how far can we trust Him? Just in this transitory life? Just in this little speck that we call the earth? If we can trust Him only thus far we are of all men most miserable. We are surrounded by stupendous forces; we are surrounded by the immensity of the unknown. After our little span of life there is a shelving brink with the infinite beyond. And still we are subject to fear—not only fear of destruction but a more dreadful fear of meeting with the infinite and holy God.

So we should be if we had but a human Christ. But now is Christ our Saviour, the one who says, "Thy sins are forgiven thee," revealed as very God. And we believe. Such a faith is a mystery to us who possess it; it seems folly to those who have it not. But if possessed it delivers us forever from fear. The world to us is all unknown; it is engulfed in an ocean of infinity. But it contains no mysteries to our Saviour. He is on the throne. He pervades the remotest bounds. He inhabits infinity. With such a Saviour we are safe.