

The Importance of Believing in the Deity of Christ

Introduction:

In the second chapter of Colossians, Paul wrote something staggering. Many Christians who read that chapter may not find the statement as staggering as it is, because it expresses a concept with which we are all very familiar. But, if one allows oneself to meditate on that statement for a bit, one can regain a perspective that allows us to appreciate the profundity of what he wrote in verse nine in reference to Jesus Christ:

“For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily”

In a brief sentence Paul wrote that Jesus of Nazareth was God incarnate. He was not saying that God indwelt Jesus in some way, but rather that the eternal God who created all things had entered the world as a human being.

This is such an amazing truth, and one that is so central to the Christian faith that it behooves us not to bypass this astounding statement too quickly but rather spend time considering some of the implications of this truth to our lives as Christians. The theological idea that Christ is God, along with the corollary doctrine of the Trinity are so central to the faith that these doctrines are among those that Christians of all denominations use to distinguish Christianity from quasi-Christian cults. Since belief in the deity of Christ is one of the doctrines that defines our faith, we will spend some time thinking about the implications of this doctrine.

I. Set Against the Voices that Speak Against this Doctrine:

But what do those outside the faith say about this doctrine? Do their reasons for rejecting Christ's deity have any weight? This is important to consider, because if we don't have firm reasons for believing in this doctrine, then we might find our confidence in it shaken when we come into contact with those who do not share our convictions.

In the media and in many educational institutions it is argued that the doctrine of the deity of Christ was invented by early church leaders as a way of gaining control over what was being taught to the masses. This may sound feasible, especially in our time when conspiracy theories in general are very much in fashion. However, we have documented evidence regarding the history of this doctrine. First, it was considered as orthodoxy long before any centralized authority over Christianity existed. Second, it was embraced by the vast majority of Christians and Christian leaders throughout the Mediterranean area, even though these Christians and their leaders only had limited contact with one another. And this unanimity existed from the early second century on.

History shows that those debates that did take place over this doctrine were decided on the basis of the teachings of Scripture. There is no historical evidence at all that any meetings took place to create an artificial orthodoxy.

Among academics, it is said that the Christian doctrine of Christ is incoherent and irrational, because it posits the idea that He is two distinct things at the same time, infinite God and a finite human being. Therefore, they say this teaching represents a fundamental contradiction of itself. However, this critique is in error because those who espouse this view misrepresent what Scripture teaches. Though Jesus is revealed to be one person, the evidence from Scripture has led Christians to recognize that He has within Himself two distinct natures, one Divine, and the other human. Therefore, He is not God in the same sense that He is human, so no contradiction is implied. As to how this reality can exist, no one can answer. However, any thinking person would expect that this would be beyond human reasoning since everything that makes God what He is, is beyond human comprehension. Since we cannot comprehend what it really means to be God, it is only natural that we cannot comprehend what it means for God to be human as well.

The cults claim both that Jesus never claimed to be God, and that the doctrine of the deity of Christ contradicts monotheism, a fundamental truth revealed in the Old Testament (Deut.6:4; Isa.44:6). In response, the New Testament makes it very clear that Christ and the disciples proclaimed the deity of Christ (see below), and the idea of Christ's deity would only contradict monotheism if Christians believed that Christ was a distinct God from Yahweh. Rather, Christians have always maintained that there is a plurality of persons within the one God, not that there are multiple Gods.

The general arguments that millions embrace that support their rejection of Christ as God do not have any real weight, they are embraced because that represents what people want to believe.

II. The Bible Teaches the Doctrine of the Deity of Christ:

A. Places in the New Testament where Jesus is called God

The real question that must be answered is whether or not the doctrine of the deity of Christ is actually taught in the Scriptures. The following passages demonstrate that it absolutely is:

John 1:1

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

In this verse the one identified as the "*Word*" is said to be both with God and to be God. But to whom does the title "*Word*" refer? The answer to this first question is found in verse fourteen of this chapter, where we are told that "*the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father*". Clearly then, this is a title for Jesus the Christ. This leads to a second question, why did John designate the Christ as being the Word of God? In Greek thought, the *logos* (the Greek term translated as "*Word*") was the intelligible law of things; therefore, the *logos* of God was God's transcendent

rationality that gave the universe order and purpose. A Hellenized Jew would think of Biblical wisdom literature that explained that God's wisdom (i.e. His Word) provided the universe with its form and coherence. Therefore, this title was an ideal one to use to identify an aspect of the one God that was distinct from the person of Yahweh. The preposition translated as "*with*" in this verse carries the personal connotation of being face to face with someone. The preposition indicates place or accompaniment but also disposition and orientation. The preposition carries the idea of an active relationship between the Word and God. The idea behind the statement that the Word "*was with God*" was to indicate that between the Father and Son there existed an interactive reciprocal relationship (see I John 1:2) thus emphasizing a distinction between the persons who are both said to be deity. In their translation, the Jehovah's Witnesses, render this last phrase as "*the Word was a God*", and justify this translation on the basis of the absence of the definite article before the noun "*God*", which they say renders the noun "*God*" as an indefinite noun. However, this conclusion reveals a great deal of ignorance about the usage of the Greek definite article, because the lack of a definite article is not simply an indication of indefiniteness but can indicate a much broader array of uses. The function of the article in this particular context was to indicate the quality of deity. The lack of the definite article was meant to keep the reader from identifying the *person* of the Word (Jesus Christ) with the *person* of God (the Father). Therefore, here, the lack of the article tells the reader that though Jesus Christ is God, He is not the Father. Therefore, John expressed himself this way in order to distinguish the Word from the person of God the Father, and yet also identify Christ as God who is one in essence with the Father. This formulation was the foundation of the Church's confession of the doctrine of the Trinity; the belief that God is one being, existing in three persons.

John 20:28

And Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and My God!"

This passage is completely straightforward, it records that in response to seeing Jesus alive after His crucifixion, Thomas gave the most profound testimony in all of Scripture to the deity of Christ; he said to Jesus "*my Lord and my God*" (vs.28). Therefore, Thomas was unequivocally calling Jesus, God. In receiving this worship Jesus was implicitly acknowledging in response that He was God, and that He did this by acknowledging the legitimacy of what Thomas had come to believe, and added that blessing would come to all who believed as he did.

Romans 9:5

of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God. Amen.

In the NKJV above, the phrase is translated as "*Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God. Amen.*" This translation reflects the conviction that Paul was claiming here that Christ is God. This is the view of several other English translations as well (ESV, HCSB, NIV, NLT, NCV). However, not all versions

choose to translate this phrase as the NKJV does. The following are a couple of examples of different renderings:

NASU

“whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever.”

NRSV

“according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever.”

The arguments in favor of this verse referring to the deity of Christ are:

- The pronoun in Greek does not precede the noun for which it is an antecedent. Therefore since “*Christ*” comes before the pronoun and “*God*” comes after it, in light of this, the pronoun “*who*” must refer to Christ.
- The statement is not in the form of a doxological expression, because such an expression would have the word “*blessed*” placed before and not after the subject of the doxology.
- It would not make sense for Paul to praise God that Jesus had been born of the Jewish race in a passage where he was expressing grief over the Jewish race’s rejection of Christ.
- The statement that Christ was “*according to the flesh...*” looks for a balancing antithesis as is elsewhere found in this epistle (1:3-4). The only option would be the declaration that He was also God.
- The Church Fathers (many of whom spoke Greek as their native language) took the words as a declaration of the deity of Christ.

Thus, taking this as a reference to the deity of Christ makes the best and most natural sense considering what Paul wrote.

Titus 2:13

Looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ

In this passage the Apostle Paul clearly states that Jesus Christ is not only Savior, but is God.

Hebrews 1:8a

But to the Son He says: Your throne, O’ God is forever and ever...

In this passage, the author was in the midst of making a contrast between Christ and the angels, to show His superiority to them. In contrast to the angels, the Son is addressed as God (this quotation in Hebrews is the most emphatic expression of the deity of Christ in the NT, and since it is based on a quotation from the OT, it clearly conveys that the doctrine of the Trinity is consistent with OT teaching). The emphasis however is upon the idea that unlike the angels, Christ is not a servant, but a sovereign. The imagery repeatedly makes the point that Christ is a sovereign. The throne and the scepter were symbols of the absolute political power of ancient kings. The fact that the author makes no effort to defend his statement about

Christ indicates that among the Jews who had embraced the Gospel, there was already the belief in the deity of Christ.

II Peter 1:1

Simon Peter, a bondservant and apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who have obtained like precious faith with us by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ.

The grammar of this verse makes it clear that Peter was stating that Jesus Christ was not only the Savior, He was also God. This is one of the clearest and strongest affirmations of the deity of Christ in the NT. It is unambiguous, and can mean nothing else.

B. Places in the NT where it is said Jesus existed as God

Philippians 2:6

Who being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God

The word translated as “*form*” refers to what one sees outwardly, however it conveys the idea that what one sees reveals the essential nature or character of a given thing. Therefore, Paul’s use of this word means that Christ existed in the visible form of God because He was God. Then, when Paul went on to write that Christ did not “*consider*” this position as “*robbery*”, he was using a word that meant to tightly cling to something and sometimes was used to convey the idea of snatching what belonged to someone else. However, here the word means to cling to something that one owns; holding on to it tightly so that it will not be taken. The idea then is that Christ did not consider the exalted position of being in the form of God as something that He had to zealously cling to, but as something He was willing to relinquish. The implication here is that this is a decision made by the pre-incarnate Christ; clearly indicating that He existed prior to the birth at Bethlehem. The reference to Christ being equal with God is equivalent to the earlier statement that He existed in God’s form, and it specifies the aspect of that form that Christ was willing to relinquish; His equality of position with the Father.

Colossians 2:9

For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily

As noted in the previous study, the Greek word translated as “*Godhead*”, simply referred to deity. Therefore, this verse states that the entirety of God’s nature exists in the human body of Christ (in His mortal body while He was on earth, and now in His glorified body in Heaven).

C. Old Testament Messianic prophecy testifies to His Divine nature

Isaiah 9:6

...and His name shall be called...Mighty God

One of the titles that the prophet applied to the coming Messiah was “*the Mighty God*”. This is the very same title that is frequently applied to Yahweh Himself elsewhere in the OT (Deut.10:17; Isa.10:21; Jer.32:18). Despite liberal and rationalistic claims about the meaning of this name (that it simply refers to a great godlike hero), there is ample proof from the way that Isaiah used this title elsewhere that he meant it as a theistic reference:

*“And it shall come to pass in that day that the remnant of Israel, and such as have escaped of the house of Jacob, will never again depend on him who defeated them, but will depend on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel, in truth. The remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to **the Mighty God**.”*

Isaiah 10:20-21

This verse is an example of how Isaiah applied the title “*Mighty God*” to Yahweh, and when he did this, he used the very same Hebrew expression that he used in 9:6.

D. Jesus associated Himself with the Divine name

“Then Moses said to God, ‘Indeed, when I come to the children of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they say to me, ‘What is His name?’ what shall I say to them?’ And God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM’. And He said, ‘Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”

Exodus 3:13-14

“Jesus said to them, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM’.”

John 8:58

E. Jesus applied to Himself a title elsewhere applied specifically to Yahweh

“Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: ‘I am the First and I am the Last; besides Me there is no God.’”

Isaiah 44:6

“I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the End, the first and the last”

Revelation 22:13

F. Jesus is said to be an object of worship, a sin if He were not God – Heb.1:6; Ex.20:3-5

“You shall have no other gods besides Me.”

Exodus 20:3

“And I fell at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, ‘see that you do not do that? I am your fellow servant, and of your brethren who have the testimony of Jesus, worship God!’”

Revelation 19:10

*“But when He again brings the firstborn into the world, He says:
‘Let all the angels of God worship Him’”*

Hebrews 1:6

G. Christ is said to have existed prior to birth:

*“But you Bethlehem... out of you shall come forth to Me the one to be ruler in Israel,
whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting”*

Micah 5:2

*“For by Him all things were created, in the heavens and upon the earth, the seen
and the unseen, whether thrones, whether dominions, whether rulers, whether
powers, all things were created through Him and unto Him.”*

Colossians 1:16

III. Historical development of the Doctrine of Christ:

As has been demonstrated, Scripture teaches us that Jesus was God without denying His genuine humanity. However the early church was faced with reconciling these two ideas into an understanding that accurately reflected the truth, which God had revealed (and in doing so avoid the logical incoherence that modern scholars wrongly accuse us of). As with the development of all doctrine, the articulation of what is meant by the teachings of Scripture concerning the Person of Christ grew from very simple ambiguous statements to expressions of great specificity. That happened as different Christian leaders began to teach things that were at odds with the traditional understanding of orthodoxy. These divergent teachings led to controversy, and the controversy led to careful examination of the evidence in Scripture, which then resulted in more refined theological conclusions. Therefore, it is helpful if we are to understand these doctrines about Christ that we know the controversies behind them that led the Church to adopt what we call orthodoxy.

Arianism: This was the teaching that Christ was not Divine. This teaching was rejected based on the very Scriptures that were examined above, cementing the idea of the deity of Christ as a central doctrine of the faith.

Apollinarianism: This was the teaching that Christ was one person with a human body, but not a human mind or spirit. According to this teaching, His mind and Spirit came from God, meaning that the mind and Spirit of the eternal God indwelt a mortal human body. This teaching was rejected because it did not do justice to the expressions in the New Testament concerning the humanity of Christ. In addition, this teaching created problems for the idea of salvation, because both the human body and the soul need salvation. Therefore, it was recognized that Jesus would have to have a human soul if He was to die in the place of those who had human souls.

Nestorianism: This was the teaching that in Jesus Christ were two separate persons. One was human and the other Divine. This dual personhood is closer to spiritual possession, or schizophrenia than to the Biblical presentation of the

Incarnation. This was rejected because there is no evidence of dual personhood in Jesus. He is never seen as being at odds with Himself, nor does He express any duality. This was seen as too artificial a solution to explain all the facts.

Monophysitism: This was the teaching that Jesus Christ had one nature only.

Rather than teaching that Jesus possessed both a human and a Divine nature, this view taught that Jesus' Divine nature absorbed a human nature, and from the two an entirely new nature was formed that was predominantly Divine but colored by humanity. This position was rejected as it made Jesus neither truly God, nor truly man. Through these controversies the Church further and further refined its understanding of the person of Christ. What each of these debates did was eliminate various possibilities that were deemed not to be true. Through this process the church developed a clear expression of what Scripture taught regarding the person of Christ. The following were the conclusions that the Church adopted:

- Jesus Christ was fully God, and fully man, and not a hybrid of the two.
- That Jesus Christ was co-equal and co-essential to the Father within the Trinity (usually described as the godhead).
- That Jesus Christ was identical to all other mortal humans except that He was conceived apart from sin. This meant He had a rational human mind and spirit, and a real physical body.
- That Jesus Christ was one person but possessed two distinct natures (Divine/human) that are inseparable and yet do not mingle so as to change the essential distinctions of either nature.

This doctrine is called the hypostatic union of Christ. The Greek word "hypostasis" means "being", therefore this theological expression means the union of two distinct natures into one being. This doctrine does not attempt to answer all the philosophical and metaphysical questions that arise from this teaching of Scripture. In fact, this theological position was intended to express more about what is not true than it intends to clearly express about what is true about the person of Christ.

We understand that Christ is one person, and that whatever He does, He does as an expression of that single personhood (the proof of which is that Christ refers to Himself as "I", never attributing any particular action or choice to one nature or the other). Yet there is a sense in which certain things Christ does are expressions of His Divine nature (Matt.28:20; Col.1:17), while others are expressions of His human nature (Matt. 4:2; Luke 3:23; 23:46; John 16:28).

IV. Why Does it Even Matter?

In recent times, various Christians have suggested that in the end, why should we worry about precise doctrinal formulas. It is argued that they are overly intellectualized and create division. Therefore, we should just seek to love Jesus and please God. However, the problem with this is that if we don't seek to understand these truths, how will we know we are actually worshipping the Jesus that actually exists rather than one who is the creation of our own imaginations or preferences? Also, it is clear that the truths articulated above were intentionally revealed by God Himself through the inspiration of Scripture. How then would it

please God to ignore this information that He so graciously and purposely gave to us. These things about Christ aren't as peripheral as some would suggest. If Christ is not who and what the Bible says He is, it calls into question whether or not He could possibly save us, and certainly our eternal destiny is not a peripheral matter. The deity of Christ is essential to our justification (the death of a human being alone would not be sufficient to pay for the sins of millions). His deity is essential if He is to be the mediator between God and us. The Scriptures make it clear that His mediatorial role is rooted in not only His humanity, but also in His deity. Finally, the above suggestion implies the possibility that what we have traditionally believed is wrong. If that is true, and since what we believe can be demonstrated to be what the Bible teaches, it would mean that the Bible teaches falsehoods or is radically mistaken. If that were true, then why should we believe any of it? Therefore, this doctrine is important to our faith, and should be thoroughly understood by all Christians.

Conclusion:

Lastly, meditating upon the deity of Christ reminds us about the grandeur of our faith. The phenomenal idea that God became human to save us because of His profound love for us.