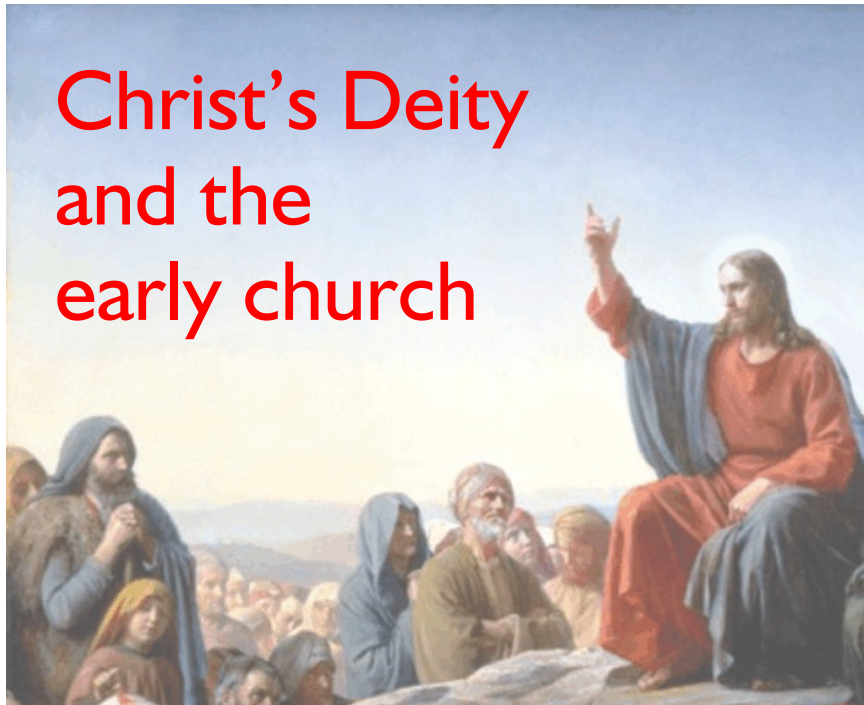


APOLOGIA

... always be ready to give a defense [Greek, *apologia*]
to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you ... 1 PETER 3:15



Christ's Deity and the early church

**Are we 'beating the air'
with Muslims, Jews
and cultists?**

By DAVID ASPINALL

Christ's Deity and the early church

What do you think of the Christ? has always been the most important question we have to ask of new religions that claim the name Christian, just as *Who do you say that I am?* is the quintessential question the Lord has for each one of us as individuals. Because we Christians who consider ourselves evangelical tend to define ourselves doctrinally rather than by any other measure, that is, by our orthodoxy rather than our orthopraxy, we also take our doctrinal measuring stick to those whose Christian profession we doubt.

In apologetics this pans out in a presentation of the gospel that concentrates on the doctrine of Christ -- especially His Deity, which has historically become the linchpin of orthodox profession. Inasmuch as this is the topic most of us tend to focus on in our debates with unbelievers (especially cultists) we do well to make sure that we have our feet planted firmly on New Testament precedent in our quest to be “ready to make a defense to everyone who asks” us to give an account for our faith (1 Pet.3:15, NAS).

But are most of us aware that for about two generations some of the best New Testament scholars, as well as many Christian students of the early church, have been engaged in debate as to the subtleties of titles pertaining to Jesus Christ? Did early believers see Christ exactly as we post-Nicene Christians see Him? More importantly for those of us in the missions field, did the apostles, our models for both evangelism and apologetics, present Christ to the world in the way we do? This is a touchy subject, particularly when we run into those who have invested most, intellectually and emotionally, in anti-Trinitarian polemics – eg Jews, Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Inasmuch as the aforementioned passage in Peter continues “make a

defense ... with gentleness and reverence [respect, *GNB*, *NIV*, *JB*, *NEB*]” we must closely observe the pattern of the presentation of truth of our earliest spiritual ancestors, to see how they made the “truth that is in Jesus” palatable – even appealing – to their Jewish and pagan audiences. And perhaps in finding out how better to present Christ in gentleness and respect to others, we might incidentally discover, hardly to our surprise, that the God who has shown us how best to deal with others has Himself so dealt with us – especially in the history of the church's understanding of Christ. That is, He who advocates gentleness and respect to *others* has Himself remembered *our* frailty, that we are dust. And the Spirit does not blow too violently upon dust (Psalm 103:8-16; John 16:12).

FIRST GENERATION - THE EARLIEST MESSAGE

(Acts 1-12, to app. 49 AD)

The first disciples responded to the resurrection of Christ with instinctive worship (Matt.28:9,17; Mark 15:19; Luke 24:52). Doubt gradually gave way to certainty as all the disciples experienced the Risen One. Thomas's reaction may be taken as typical; meeting the resurrected One *himself*, the doubts Thomas had about *others'* testimony were shoved aside by the testimony of his own senses. Thomas cried out “My Lord and My God”, grasping intuitively that somehow now he and the other disciples had come *directly* in touch with Deity in the risen Christ.

We must not, however, make the mistake of thinking that the apostles **understood** Christ's Deity. New Testament scholars are virtually unanimous that the early church worshipped Christ instinctively¹, like children, not with mature understanding born of theological reflection. That is, the disciples of the first era *apprehended* God in Christ without apparently *comprehending* the significance of that faith, particularly as it impacted on their traditional Jewish monotheistic understanding. We might remember that the disciples

were already calling Christ “Lord”² but at the same time wondering, when He stilled the storm, *What kind of a man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?* (Matt.8:23-27). And too, even after Peter’s confession of Him – *You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God* – the Master still had to rebuke Peter who failed to comprehend the full implications of that Messianic title (Matt.16:13-28). Yet, as John tells us, Christ knew He *had many more things to reveal* to the disciples, but they could not bear them yet (John 16:12). As it was the Father who had revealed the Messiahship of Jesus to them (Matt.16:17), so the Holy Spirit would guide the disciples into the **full** significance of Jesus’s Lordship (John 16:13,14). The Spirit, John tells us, would glorify Christ.

Therefore when we read in the first chapters of Acts the earliest proclamation of the gospel, we note the carefulness of the apostles in presenting the gospel to already-prejudiced Jewish ears. The emphasis of those early sermons is upon Christ, yet the terminology used of Him is sensitive to the monotheism of the Jewish hearers. So Peter, in pointing to Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah, and the culpability of the nation in his death, still presents His Lord to the Jews as *Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God*, whom even death could not defeat, who now had *been exalted to the right hand of God*. And, Peter adds, *God made Him both Lord and Christ*. The dominant image that Peter and the apostles try to transmit to the minds of their fanatically monotheistic hearers is of Jesus Christ the **suffering servant of the Lord** (Yahweh in the Old Testament) (Acts 2:22,33,36). Though the **Name** they proclaim is the name of Jesus, it is in this context of His role as the Lord’s exalted Servant, in fulfilment of Isaiah (Acts 2:38; 3:6,13,16,18,26; 4:27,30). Jesus is *the Christ appointed for you*, Peter tells the unbelieving Jews (Acts 3:20). He is also the prophet foretold by Moses (vv.22,23). Let us contrast the apostles’ tact in the face of Jewish monotheistic prejudice with our recklessness in often allowing the full blaze of the Lord’s glory shine in the face of unbelievers, particularly those already biased against His Deity³. Whatever the apostles had already come

to understand as to relationship between God and Christ (and the theologians are still very divided on this question⁴), the dominant theme of their message to the Jew remained **Jesus the Messiah** (Acts 4:10-12, 26). Their proclamation centred on *what we have seen and heard*, not theological abstractions with which even the church would wrestle 300 years (Acts 4:20). The things “seen and heard” were, of course, the death, burial and resurrection of the Christ (4:30-32). Though the Jewish leaders still won’t even name the Crucified One, referring to Him contemptuously as *this man* (Acts 4:28), THE NAME continues to be proclaimed unashamedly (Acts 4:12, 30). The full implications of the centrality of the Name of Jesus in this message would not be understood, apparently, till 2 generations later in the apostolic teaching.

PAUL & THE GENTILE MISSION

(Acts 13-28, app.50-62 AD)

Some scholars have seen in Paul the first unqualified assertions of Christ’s Deity. Others, more cautious, point out that even passages which CAN be translated so as to refer to the Deity of Christ allow for other renderings. Even if we adopt the more conservative option, we are still faced with the fact that Paul stops short of the familiar Christian assertion “Jesus is God” (which assertion, we might add is often the centre of dialogue with cultists). And this caution of Paul is the more notable in that the polytheistic milieu of the Gentile mission would allow for the deification of a man, or the incarnation of a deity. We also find in Paul a clear doctrine of the subordination of the Son (1 Cor. 11:3; 15:28), which Arians of the 4th century would later use to prove the essential inferiority of the Son. Though most New Testament scholars assert that Paul certainly believed in the full Deity of Christ, they also observe that Paul’s tendency to separate Christ from God, and to subordinate Him to God, are no accidents⁵. These mental habits of Paul are his attempts to preserve the essential monotheism of the Christian faith. We in apologetic ministry do well

to imitate Paul, especially when confronted with Muslims, Jews and Jehovah's Witnesses, among other faiths which see us as brandishing before them a species of polytheism. The great Scottish theologian James Denney had a similar aversion to the imprecise and potentially catastrophic language of 'popular piety'. Denney said "Jesus is man as well as God, in some way therefore both less and more than God; and consequently a form of proposition which in our idiom suggests inevitably the precise equivalence of Jesus and God does some kind of injustice to the truth".⁶ Nevertheless, the Apostle Paul began the process of giving intellectual and theological justification to the church's worship of a man who was also God.⁷ What before had been *latent* in the church's message was about to become *patent* in the ministry of the Apostle John.⁸

SECOND GENERATION - JOHN

(app. 62-100 AD)

What is it that causes Christians to jump into John when in need of 'prooftexts' for the Deity of Christ? We don't find such clear assertions of Christ's Deity in Matthew, Mark and Luke, written during the first generation of Christian disciples. Why not? Liberal-tending critics often use this fact to confirm a development in understanding of Christ's person in the early church.⁹ *The Watchtower* and other critics of orthodoxy observe the reticence of these earliest gospels, and of Christ Himself as quoted in them, and conclude that neither Christ or His earliest followers were aware of His supposed Deity. But John has his own explanation for the unique content of his gospel, which contrasts so markedly with the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke, called such from the Greek verb *synopsesthai*, meaning "going to see together", that is, taking a common view). The Spirit, John remembers Jesus saying that last night, would *guide [them] into all truth*, because, He told them, *ye cannot bear them now* (John 16:12-14) If disciples were not ready to bear the full glory of Christ after 3 years with Him, how less those we

try to persuade with a face full of prooftexts? And remember, our **best** 'proofs' are from this very gospel John, written to believers who already had 60 years of thinking and teaching on the Person of Christ to prepare them for the Spirit's full revelation of His glory. The apparent date of the Revelation, during that same last decade of the first century, confirms to the gentle pattern of the Spirit's method with the church. The Revelation -- not of *John*, but of *Jesus Christ* (Rev.1:1) -- gives us unblushing the full glory of Christ, who is worshipped with God Himself by all creatures in heaven and earth (5:13), and who sits on the very throne of God Himself (22:1,3). But this book too is addressed to the church(es), ***not to unbelievers*** (1:1,4).

APOSTOLIC and ANTI-NICENE FATHERS

(app. 100-250 AD)

We see, not astonishingly, a more dogmatic insistence on the Deity of Christ in the earliest post-apostolic testimony. Ignatius, for example, on his way to martyrdom in Rome, flies in the face of both docetic heretics and the imperial cult, which had taken to worshipping Caesar as both Lord and God, in his insistence that not only was Christ **true man**, He was also **fully God**. Justin, another martyr for the faith about a generation later (ca.150 A.D.), also testifies to the true Deity of Christ. By this time it was already well-known among outsiders that Christ was worshipped in the assemblies of believers.¹⁰

For the early church, both Jewish and pagan in background, it appears that it was NOT as difficult to believe that Christ was true God as it was to believe that true God could become true man. The rapidly emerging dogmatic constructions which, two centuries later, would lead to the full flowering of trinitarianism, were already being worked out by the apologists and theologians of the second century, who had to give an answer to the intelligent questions of pagans who demanded to know how this worship of Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish

man, could be reconciled with the monotheism of Judaism (1 Pet.3:15).¹¹

The church which had at first worshipped Christ *in Spirit*, spontaneously, as it were, without fully grasping intellectually the significance of what they did, now struggled to give an intellectual structure to its faith, and a rational defense for its seemingly contradictory beliefs. In so doing, defenders of the faith such as Justin, Irenaeus, and Origen inevitably drew upon the thought world of their pagan neighbours in trying to reconcile this new faith with Greek thought forms. This attempt to explain the dogmas of emergent Trinitarianism in Greek terminology is misunderstood as compromise with paganism by anti-Trinitarians. Indeed, the attempt to marry Christian doctrine with Greek philosophy was even condemned by Tertullian, a contemporary of these apologists. Nevertheless, the church was attempting to make the Christian faith intelligible to the thinking pagan, who often was trained in the school of Plato and his philosophical descendants. In so doing, the fathers were only imitating the Apostle Paul, who translated Old Testament theology into the language of the philosophers in Athens (Acts 17). And they were also following the example of the Lord Himself, who translated His divinity into the "form of a servant" to bring us to the Father (Phil. 2:7).

NOTES

1. William Sanday, in his masterful study *Christologies Ancient and Modern* (Oxford, 1910, p.7), compares the early believers' Christology to a child beginning to walk, who "naturally staggers and stumbles a little until it has found the use of its limbs". But as C.F.D. Moule points out, even the use of the word "worship" in reference to Christ is not as decisive as some Christians would like. See *The Origin of Christology* (Cambridge, 1977), p.41. See also Moule's excursus, p.175.

2. The use of "Lord" in address to Christ in the Gospels is not a proof of His Deity, as many Christians would aver. See Vincent Taylor, *The Names of Jesus* (Macmillan, 1953), p.41, and Richard Longenecker, *The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity* (Baker, 1981), p.130.
3. For other examples of the early apostles' sensitivity to Jewish prejudice see the *Apologia* studies in *Acts: The Apologetic of the Apostles*. See also Longenecker, p.140.
4. For the reason why the earliest disciples may have hesitated to use the word "God" of Christ, see I.H. Marshall, *The Origins of New Testament Christology* (IVP, 1976), p.107, and Raymond E. Brown, *Jesus God and Man* (Macmillan, 1967), pp.1-38; and Vincent Taylor, *The Person of Christ in New Testament Teaching* (Macmillan, 1958), p.133.
5. See Longenecker, pp.139-40, for interesting suggestions as to why the uncontested ascriptions of Deity to Christ occur predominantly in late 1st century New Testament writings. See also Taylor, *Person*, pp. 55-60, and Moule, p. 137.
6. *Letters of Principal James Denney to W. Robertson Nicoll 1883-1917* (Hodder & Stoughton, n.d. ca. 1920) pp. 120-126. Cited by Taylor, *Person*, p.57.
7. A.E.J. Rawlinson, *The New Testament Doctrine of the Christ* (Bampton Lectures for 1926, Longmans, Green & Co. 1926) p. 236. Also Taylor, *Person*, p. 215.
8. Longenecker (p. 135) sees the doctrine of Christ's Deity lying latent "in the substratum of thought" even in the early disciples' worshipful "Jesus is Lord". Similarly Rawlinson (p. 159) sees the theology of Paul, though not explicitly so, yet "Trinitarian in tendency".

9. For a helpful discussion of the chronology of these famous prooftexts for the Deity of Christ, and of the self-knowledge of Christ, see Brown pp. 31, 86ff.
10. Pliny the Younger writes Emperor Trajan (ca. 110 A.D.) and comments on the common practice in Christian assemblies of singing "a hymn to Christ, as to a god" -- see Howard Clark Kee, *The Origins of Christianity: Sources and Documents* (Prentice-Hall, 1973) pp.51-53.
11. See J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (A.& C. Black, 2nd.ed. 1960), pp.138-162) for an excellent summary of the various strands of thought among the fathers as to the relationship of Christ's divinity and humanity.