

THE DOCTRINE OF CHRIST

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During the public ministry of Jesus the Pharisees and Sadducees were his constant enemies. After facing a particularly difficult series of their questions, “Jesus asked them a question, saying, What think ye of Christ? whose son is he? They say unto him, The son of David. He saith unto them, How then doth David in the Spirit call him Lord, saying, The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand, til I put thine enemies underneath thy feet? If David then called him Lord, how is he his son? And no one was able to answer him a word, neither durst any man from that day forth ask him anymore questions.” (Matt. 22:41-46).

In this exchange Jesus presented to the Pharisees a riddle which they were unable to answer. In effect his question was, “How is it that Christ can be David’s son, or descendent, and yet at the same time be David’s Lord?” The answer lies in the unique nature of Jesus of Nazareth, a fact which the Pharisees were either unwilling or unable to see. Christ’s question is a question that must be faced by all men. Upon the answer to this question all men determine their ultimate eternal destiny. “What think ye of the Christ, whose son is he?” Some think of Jesus as merely a profound thinker, a great teacher, a martyr who lived ahead of his time. Others of us know him to be the divine Son of God, the Savior of the world.

There was a time when men doubted that Jesus of Nazareth had actually existed, but no informed person of our time doubts the historicity of Jesus. The evidence has been too solid and too abundant. When H. G. Wells announced his list of the top ten men of history, he placed Jesus as the first in his list.

What does the Bible say concerning Christ? What is the Biblical teaching, or doctrine, of Christ? In this series of studies we have seen the importance of doctrine, we have studied the Biblical doctrine of God, and now we approach the study of the Biblical doctrine of Christ.

What Was His Origin?

In our study of God we began with the opening sentence of the opening chapter of the opening book of the Bible, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”(Gen. 1:1). This is our beginning point again today. Immediately, we move to the twenty-sixth verse of this opening chapter of the Bible and find this statement, “And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness ... And God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.” (Gen. 1:26-27). Notice that God said, “Let us (plural) make man in our (plural) image, after our (plural) likeness.” To whom was God speaking? Who was present with God in the beginning, and partner in the act of creation?

In the Old Testament we do not find a clear-cut answer to these questions. Not until we have entered the New Testament and come to the opening verses of the gospel of John do we have our answer. The Holy Spirit guided John to write, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him; and without him was not anything made that hath been made ... And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father), full of grace and truth.” (John 1:1-3, 14). This passage teaches us a number of things: The Word, or Logos, became flesh and dwelt among men, which means that it clearly is identified with Christ. Second, this Being was present with God in the beginning and is therefore an eternally existent Being. Third, This Being was God and is therefore divine. Fourth, this Being had a part in the creation itself. The answer, then, to our query of who was present when God created the universe is that the Logos, or Word, or Christ, was present and was a partner in this stupendous creative act. Later, he came and dwelt among men in human fleshly form.

To this agrees the account found in Matt. 1:20-25, which tells a part of the birth story of Jesus, as it related to Joseph who was to become husband of Mary. The account is as follows, “But when he thought on these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit: And thou shalt call his name JESUS; for it is he that shall save his people from their sins. Now all this is come to pass, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel; which is, being interpreted, God with us. And Joseph arose from his sleep, and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took unto him his wife; and knew her not til she had brought forth a son; and he called his name JESUS.”

From this inspired passage we learn with certainty that Jesus of Nazareth was the product of a human mother, and of the Holy Spirit of God as father. This was a fulfillment of a prophecy quoted from Isaiah 7:14. Even his name means “God with us.” Thus, the eternal being who was present in the beginning and at the creation came to dwell in human form among men in order that the people “might be saved from their sins.”

What Is His Nature?

Our question was asked by the Lord himself, as indicated in the following paragraph, “Now when Jesus came into the parts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Who do men say that the Son of man is? And they said, Some say John the Baptist; some Elijah; and others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. He saith unto them, But who say ye that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jonah: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father who is in heaven. And I also say unto thee, that thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” (Matt. 16:13-18).

“Jesus is the divine Son of the living God.” Upon this bed-rock fact he established his church. To this agrees the account found in Matt. 3:17, where at the baptism of Jesus, a cloud overshadowed him and the voice of God said, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” A similar statement was made on the Mount of Transfiguration, when before the eyes of Peter, James, and John, a cloud again passed over and God’s voice said, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him.” (Matt. 17:5).

In the early centuries of Christian history the Sabellians enunciated the idea that Jesus was only the “temporal manifestation of one supreme being.” It was their view that at one time this divine being was God the Creator; at another time he was Jesus the Redeemer; and at still another time he was the Holy Spirit or Sustainer of the universe. This idea that one supreme being simply manifested himself in different roles at different times does not bear the light of the scriptures. For example, we remember that he said, “It is expedient for you that I go away; for if I go not away, the Comforter (Holy Spirit) will not come unto you; but if I go, I will send him unto you.” (John 16:7).

Tertullian, a lawyer of North Africa who lived from 160 to 220 A.D., has a better explanation. His definition of God is “one substance in three persons.” His word “substantia” literally means property or status of which three or more could easily share ownership. In this case the substance is “divineness,” or “divinity,” or “God-ness,” or “almightiness.” “Persona,” as Tertullian used it, refers to a “functioning unit” or in this case three distinct persons. This writer used the analogy of the tree, pointing out that a tree has roots, a trunk, and branches. While each of these is distinct, each also is a part of the tree. In the same way, God and Christ and the Holy Spirit are distinct, but each is divine and shares divinity with the others.

The usual way that this has been conveyed down through the centuries is the form of a triangle, with God the Father at the apex of the triangle, with Christ the Redeemer at one of the other angles, and with the Holy Spirit at the third angle. They share with each other divinity, though they are three distinct persons,.

This seems to be borne out in such passages as Matthew 28:19, “Go ye, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” The final sentence of Paul’s second Corinthian letter is another example, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.” (II Cor. 13:14.) In Paul’s speech on Mars’ Hill in Athens he said, “Being then the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and device of man.” (Acts 17:29). Here his reference is to the Godhead, which includes the three divine beings which make up divinity.

A summary of what we have been saying is found in Phil. 2:5-3, as follows: “Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, existing in the form of God, counted not the being on an equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, becoming obedient even unto death, yea, the death of the cross.”

What Is His Work?

In John 14:9, Jesus said, “He that hath seen me hath seen the Father.” Jesus came to reveal the Father to men more fully. In the sixth verse of the same chapter Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life: no one cometh unto the Father, but by me,” Jesus came into the world to save men from their sins and to bring mankind from his separated, estranged state back into covenant relationships with God. Because of sin man had been estranged from God and was lost. Jesus came to redeem man. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life.” (John 3:16).

In I John 1:7 we read, “If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanseth us from all sin.” It was necessary that the blood of Jesus be sacrificed in order that justice be satisfied and man redeemed from the burden of his own sin. Thus, Jesus is our Redeemer, our Savior, the Messiah, the Christ. Hebrews 4:15 adds, “For we have not a high priest that cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but one that hath been in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.” Jesus is our Mediator, our Intercessor, and it is through him that we approach the throne of God in prayer. Jesus came into the world and taught us God’s way of living and then exemplified it perfectly in his own life.

Conclusion

It is important that we recognize that Christ is not an optional item--one that can be taken or left alone according to the wish of each individual man, rather, he is the water of life, the bread of life, even life itself. Without him man cannot live spiritually. Man is in a healthy condition only when he has come to believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and has accepted him as his Savior.

The apostle Paul spoke of Christ in this manner, "Christ in you, the hope of glory." (Col. 1:27). At another time he is quoted in Ephesians 3:17 as praying, "That Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith." Our only hope of glory or eternal greatness is in Christ. That hope was made actual by our acceptance of Christ through obedience to his commands. It is for that reason that I urge upon you belief in Christ as God's Son, to be followed by genuine repentance from all past sins, to be followed by a public confession of faith in Christ, which in turn is followed by baptism for the remission of sins. This is the ancient New Testament manner of accepting Christ. It is the way that he and his disciples taught men to come to him. It is the only way. Jesus the Christ, the divine Son of God loved us enough to die for us on the cross; let us love him enough to give our lives to him in obedient service.