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THE PERSON OF CHRIST

Questions are often a valuable way to understand truth. A number of questions could be asked in order to help us understand the person of Christ. For example, when Jesus was a young man helping his father Joseph in carpentry, would it have been appropriate for Jesus to ask what a certain tool was? Or, because he was also fully God, did Christ already know the answer, thus making any question superfluous? Again, we could ask, did Christ, who is the eternal Son of God, need to pray? Or did he merely pray as an example for believers? A trickier question—one that most answer wrongly, in my experience—is: does Christ have one will or two wills? Moreover, did he live by faith or by sight while he ministered on earth? And did he retain his human

nature after going to heaven? These questions and many more have been answered in different ways by thoughtful Christians. Our answers to these questions depend entirely upon the view we have of Christ's person.

Perhaps we should consider a more fundamental question before we answer the others, that is: Why did Christ come to earth? Christology involves understanding the person and work of Christ—his person ordinarily discussed in Scripture before his work (see John 1 and Heb. 1–2). These two aspects of Christology are so inter-related that it is practically impossible to discuss his person without also discussing his work. Nor is it possible to appreciate his work apart from understanding who he is; and knowing who he is enables us to understand why he alone is able to save sinners!

CUR DEUS HOMO?
('WHY DID GOD BECOME MAN?')

As a starting point for the investigation of Christology, I will consider the question posed by the brilliant eleventh-century theologian, Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109). He wrote a famous work titled *Cur Deus homo?*, which may be translated 'Why did God become man?' This question has been answered differently by many great theologians, even those from within the same theological tradition.

One can detect obvious strains of Anselm's thinking in Reformed theologians during the time of the Reformation and indeed in subsequent centuries. For

example, following Anselm's thought on the necessity of Christ's satisfaction, theologians such as John Calvin and John Owen held to the view that Christ came into the world to repair the damage done by sin.[1] However, the Puritan theologian Thomas Goodwin argued that Christ was ordained as mediator for 'higher ends' than the salvation of God's people. According to Goodwin, the principal reason that the Son of God became man was not that sinners might be saved by his meritorious work, though of course that was also a reason. Rather, in Goodwin's view, the benefits procured by Christ 'are all far inferior to the gift of his person unto us, and much more the glory of his person itself. His person is of infinite more worth than they all can be of.'[2] Therefore, God's 'chief end was not to bring Christ into the world for us, but us for Christ…and God contrived all things that do fall out, and even redemption itself, for the setting forth of Christ's glory, more than our salvation.'[3] These are remarkable words. But Goodwin was not alone in his view. Another Puritan, Stephen Charnock, equally affirmed that there is 'something in Christ more excellent and comely than the office of a Saviour; the greatness of his person is more excellent, than the salvation procured by his death.'[4] Perhaps the most glorious statement on Christ's person comes from Paul's letter to the Colossians where he speaks of Christ as the 'image of the invisible God' (Col. 1:15; see also Heb. 1:3). The words that follow from that proclamation of Christ's person indicate that all that Christ has done, and continues to do, depend on and reflect the glory of his person.

I cannot help but think that the emphases of Goodwin and Charnock are sorely missing in many modern treatments on the topic of Christology—and perhaps even in our own views of Christ—where the glory of his person takes an obvious back-seat to what he has done for us. The glory of Christ is not an appendix to the topic of Christology. As it is the culmination of all we can say about his person and work, so his glory provides the most basic reason for saying it, in that it is the basis for and the fullness of our eternal enjoyment of him in Heaven. So to answer Anselm's question, we are surely not incorrect to emphasize the need for salvation as one end for Christ's incarnation; but we are not speaking the whole truth if we make Christ's personal glory subservient to our salvation. As the prophet Isaiah wrote, God speaks of his children as those who are 'called by [his] name, whom [he] created for [his] glory, whom [he] formed and made' (Isa. 43:7).

CHRISTOLOGY 'FROM ABOVE'

In discussing the incarnation of the Son of God we have no choice but to begin our Christology from 'above' rather than from 'below'. Starting from 'above' is reflective of the pattern one finds in the New Testament that focuses first on the divinity ('above') of Christ and then on his humanity ('below'). One only has to look at the prologue in John's Gospel where the first verse speaks unambiguously about Christ's divine nature and personhood. John then moves to verse 14 where

he affirms that the Word who is 'face-to-face' with God, and is God, has 'become flesh'. If Romans 3:21ff represents Paul's nuclear bomb against Pharisaic religion, then surely John could have said nothing more contrary to Jewish conceptions of Jesus than that the Word, who is Yahweh, became flesh.

The author of Hebrews also begins with a Christology from 'above'. Comparing Hebrews 1 and 2 shows that chapter 1 gives fuller treatment to the divinity of Christ whereas chapter 2 focuses principally on his humanity. A final example, from among many texts that could have been chosen, is Paul's 'Christ-hymn' in Philippians 2, a most significant statement for informing our view of Christ. One detects a high-low-high movement where the eternal divine Son becomes a servant by humbling himself through the incarnation and the obedience of the crucifixion. Yet the God-man is exalted by the Father because of his obedience to death on a cross and he is given the divine name, 'Lord'. More will be said later on this section in Philippians, but clearly the Christology in this hymn begins from 'above' and not from 'below'. This point is absolutely vital if we are going to appreciate the person of Christ.

Why is this important? There is a tendency in our minds to think of Christ as a 'superman'. That is, we fail to believe adequately that he is 'very God of very God' (*autotheos*—God of himself), equal in every way with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Viewing Christ as a sort of 'superman' also prevents us from appreciating his true humanity. Of course, like the doctrine of the

Trinity, the fact of the incarnation is a great mystery and its full truth lies beyond our finite comprehension. That many Christians have managed this mystery by thinking of Christ as a 'superman' explains why certain heresies (for example Arianism and the Jehovah's Witnesses) have flourished and still flourish at precisely these points of theology. A default mode of many theological errors begins when we try to manage God in our own thinking, rather than being content with the many mysteries of the Christian religion that go beyond our reason.

Arianism refers to the fourth century 'archetypal Christian heresy' that denied the divinity of Christ. Arius of Alexandria (c. 250–336) promulgated the view that the Logos was the Son and Servant of God, but not co-equal with God the Father. Arius viewed the Son as a power of God and thus a creature. Hence the famous Arian dictum that there was a time before the Son of God or there was a time when the Son of God was not. In the Post-Reformation period the Socinians held to basically an Arian view of the Son; and today a number of cults, including the Jehovah's Witnesses, also hold to an Arian view.

THE DIVINE SON

A number of fine treatments proving the divinity of Jesus can be found throughout the centuries. As noted, our Christology must begin from above because that is the general picture one finds in the New Testament. In addition to John 1 and Hebrews 1, what other evidences are there that Jesus has a divine nature that is equal with that of the Father and the Holy Spirit? The way

in which John in the book of Revelation uses the book of Isaiah provides indisputable proof that Jesus is the divine Son of God.

Consider the following passages:

YHWH (Isaiah)	Jesus (Revelation)
41:4 I, the Lord, the first, and with the last; I am he.	1:17 Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one.
44:6 I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god.	2:8 And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: 'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.'
48:12 I am he; I am the first, and I am the last.	22:13 I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.

There is no question that John, whose knowledge of the Old Testament is remarkable, believed without any doubt that the resurrected Lord of glory is not only human, but also the divine Lord. John ascribed the divine name to Jesus. Exodus 3:14 explains what the divine name (YHWH) means. As translated in the ESV it means 'I AM WHO I AM.' From the context we could also well translate YHWH as either 'I will be who I will be' or 'I will be who I have been', a rendering that speaks of God's eternity and immutability. This means that the language of Isaiah about the first and the last would be a restating of the divine name, and John's claim that Jesus is the Alpha and Omega (Rev. 22:13) means that Jesus is YHWH.

John makes another reference to Isaiah which proves the divinity of Christ. In Isaiah 6 the prophet sees a vision of 'the King, the LORD of hosts' (Isa. 6:5). No one disputes that Isaiah was given a vision of God. But John, quoting a large section of Isaiah 6, asserts in his gospel that Isaiah 'said these things because he saw [Jesus'] glory and spoke of him' (12:41). Moreover, because Jesus is the LORD (Yahweh), he can petition his Father to glorify him in his Father's presence 'with the glory that [he] had with [his Father] before the world existed' (John 17:5). Of course, in Isaiah we read that God gives his glory to no one else (Isa. 42:8), which means that Christ is either making an abominable request to which he has no rightful claim, or he is in fact entitled to the divine glory that belongs to him as the eternal Son of God.

Paul also makes use of the language in Isaiah in the Christ-hymn (Phil. 2:5–11) to prove Christ's divinity. Verse 6 ('who, though he was in the form of God') may appear to be the obvious place where Paul establishes that the humbled servant is also the eternal God, but verses 9–11 have an important background in Isaiah 45:22–3.

In Philippians 2:9–11 Paul affirms that God has granted to Jesus the glory that, according to Isaiah, belongs to God alone. In Isaiah 45:22–3 'every knee shall bow' to God. Paul is saying therefore that Jesus enjoys the same status as Yahweh. This makes perfect sense in light of the earlier part of the Christ-hymn (v. 6 'who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped'), and shows above all

that the 'name' (v. 10) in question is the Tetragrammaton (YHWH). Thus Jesus is not merely a lord, but the divine Lord. Note the connection:

Isaiah 45:22–23	Philippians 2:9–11
Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return: 'To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance.'	Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

THE INCARNATION: GOD'S GREATEST WONDER

Among the many mysteries in the Christian religion, the incarnation is, with the trinity, the most wondrous. Some scholars have assumed that the Eastern Orthodox tradition has done more justice to the centrality of the incarnation than the Western tradition, where one finds an emphasis on the atonement (and sometimes the resurrection). This is more of a caricature than truth. Reformed theologians cherished the incarnation. They wrote often of the incarnation as the greatest wonder that God ever did. To borrow a phrase from Thomas Goodwin, heaven kissed earth when God became man. Do we realize how wonderful this truth is?