

Chapter 3: The Deity of the Lord Jesus Christ

THE DEITY OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST

The Lord Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God. The Scriptures declare:

- (a) His virgin birth (Matt. 1:23; Luke 1:31,35).
- (b) His sinless life (Heb. 7:26; 1 Peter 2:22).
- (c) His miracles (Acts 2:22; 10:38).
- (d) His substitutionary work on the cross (1 Cor. 15:3; 2 Cor. 5:21).
- (e) His bodily resurrection from the dead (Matt 28:6; Luke 24:39; 1 Cor. 15:4).
- (f) His exaltation to the right hand of God (Acts 1:9,11; 2:33; Phil. 2:9-11; Heb. 1:3).

THE PERSON OF CHRIST

Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God. John 1:18 expresses His deity in a very explicit way: “No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.” His being “at the Father’s side” expresses, not a distinction in essence or an inferiority in any way, but a close relationship to the Father and a sharing in the Father’s authority. The opening verse of this great chapter in John identifies the “Word” as being in the beginning with the Father, a clear statement of the coexistence of the Son with the Father from eternity. It also declares “the Word was God,” that is, Deity.¹

Jesus himself acknowledged His deity, at least by implication, when He stated, “‘Anyone who has seen me has the Father’” (John 14:9). He also received worship from people (Matt. 2:2,11; 14:33; 28:9) and exercised divine authority, forgiving sins (Mark 2:1-12). His disciples recognized Him as the Son of God (Matt. 16:16). Even “doubting Thomas” was convinced of the deity of Jesus Christ at that dramatic encounter in the Upper Room (John 20:28). And today as well, those who meet the resurrected Christ fall in adoration and worship before Him, saying, “My Lord and my God.”

The deity of Christ includes His coexistence in time and eternity with the Father and the Holy Spirit. As the prologue of John indicates, the “Word” was eternally preexistent. The use of the term “Word” (Gk. *Logos*) is significant, since Jesus Christ is the chief agency of the Godhead for expressing the divine will. He is not only the one Mediator between God and mankind (1 Tim. 2:5), He was also the Mediator in creation. God spoke the universe into existence through the Son as the Living Word, and “without him [apart from Him], nothing was made [in creation] that has been made” (John 1; 3). As Colossians 1:15 says, Christ is “the image of the invisible God.” Hebrews 1:1-2 also proclaims the great truth that Christ is the fullest and finest revelation of God to humankind. From the beginning, the “Word,” the very expression of God himself, has been actively disclosing God. And then, “when the

¹ Though the word “God” does not have the article in the Gk. here, it clearly means God with a capital “G”; just as it does in John 1:18; 3:24; and many other places where the Gk. does not have the article. It should be noted too that Thomas called Jesus literally “the Lord of me and the God of me (Gk. *ho theos mou*). Thus he clearly meant God with a capital “G.”

time had fully come” (Gal. 4:4), “the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14).

Prior to that great coming of God in a new way into human history, the Word was eternally in existence, functioning as the Revealer of God. It is very probable that the theophanies (divine appearances) of the Old Testament were in reality “Christophanies,” since in His preexistent state, Christ’s brief encounters with people to reveal God’s will would be in perfect accord with His office work as Revealer. Consider for example such passages as Genesis 21:17-20; 48:16; and Exodus 23:20. In these passages “the angel of the Lord” is clearly identified as Deity, yet distinguished from God the Father. Genesis 48:16 specifically refers to the heavenly messenger as one who “redeemed” (KJV), or “delivered” (NIV). In other passages where the angel of the Lord is both identified with God and distinguished from Him, or where the angel of the Lord receives worship (as in Judg. 13:16-22), it seems obvious that the angel was a manifestation of Christ.² Such Old Testament manifestations of the Second Person of the Trinity point forward to the Incarnation, when Christ would come to make His dwelling among the people of this world.

Not only is Jesus Christ fully God, He is also fully human. He was not part God and part man. He was and is 100 percent human. That is, He held a full set of divine qualities and a full set of human qualities in the same Person in such a way that they did not interfere with each other. He remains the God-Man in heaven now and He will return as the “same Jesus” who ascended into heaven from the Mount of Olives (see Acts 1:11). Numerous passages teach clearly that Jesus of Nazareth had a truly human body and a rational soul. All that was characteristic of unfallen human beings (i.e., Adam and Eve) was found in Him. He was truly the Second Adam (see 1 Cor. 15:45,47). The Gospel accounts take for granted Christ’s humanity. He is described as a baby in the manger and subject to human laws of growth (see Luke 2:40,52). He learned; He became hungry, thirsty, and tired (see Mark 2:15; John 4:6). He suffered anxiety and disappointment (see Mark 9:19); He suffered physical and mental pain, and succumbed to death (see Mark 14:33,37; 15:33-38). In the Book of Hebrews great care is taken to show the full identification of Jesus Christ with humanity (2:9,17; 4:15; 5:7-8; 12:2).

The truth, then, is that in the one person of the Lord Jesus Christ dwells a fully divine nature and a fully human nature, two natures unconfused residing in one Person. He is indeed fully God and fully human, heaven and earth come together in the most wonderful of all persons.

Before leaving this very brief discussion of the person of Christ, let us look at the significance of the full title given to Him in the Bible: “the Lord Jesus Christ.” This title describes Him and helps us to see more clearly who He is.

The term “Lord” represents the Greek *kurios* and the Hebrew ‘*Adonai*’³ and *Yahweh*.⁴ To the cultures of the ancient Near East, “Lord” was always an ascription of great reverence when it applied to rulers. The nations around used it of their kings

² Some fear that identifying the angel of the Lord with Christ would take away from the uniqueness of Christ’s New Testament incarnation. However, that uniqueness involves Christ’s full identification with humanity in His birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection. No temporary preincarnate manifestation takes away from that uniqueness.

³ A title, “my Lord, my Master, the One I belong to.”

⁴ God’s personal divine Name.

in the same way they used it of their gods, for most of the pagan kings claimed to be gods. The term, therefore, represented worship and obedience. *Kurios* could be used in addressing ordinary persons simply as a very polite way of saying sir. However, the Bible declares that Jesus was given the name “Lord” by the Father, thereby identifying Him as divine Lord (Phil. 2:9-11). The Christians easily adopted this term, recognizing Jesus as divine Lord and clearly intending by its use to acknowledge complete servitude and submission to the Supreme Being. A favorite title Paul used of himself was “servant” (Gk. *doulos*, “slave,” that is, a love slave) of Christ Jesus (Rom. 1:1; Phil. 1:1). Absolute surrender is appropriate with respect to an Absolute Master. The practical significance of this term is staggering in its implications for daily life. All of life is to be included under the lordship of Christ. He is to be Master of everything and every moment in the life of everyone who has been born into the family of God.

This does not mean He is a tyrant. Jesus said, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22; 25-27; see also Matt. 20:25-28). Jesus lived and taught servant leadership.

The personal name “Jesus” comes from the Hebrew name Joshua, meaning “the Lord [Yahweh] is salvation.” It is the given name of God’s Son, given before His birth by divine direction (see Matt. 1:21; Luke 1:310). This name is a reminder of the great purpose God has in the Incarnation—to bring salvation and deliverance from the bondage of sin. It is important to note that the Bible is careful to designate one particular person at a particular time in history as the embodiment of God’s salvation. It is not just any person, but the One whom people called “Jesus of Nazareth,” “the carpenter,” “Mary’s son.” A unique feature of Christianity is that it is bound up in a historical personage, not relegated to the philosophical systems that are but products of human reasoning and imagination. Christianity is anchored in historic events and a historic Person.

It must be pointed out, however, that although the name “Jesus” depicts His humanity, the Bible very carefully guards the manner of His birth from mere natural procreation. He was born of a virgin. His conception was miraculous, the creative work of the Holy Spirit by the power of the Most High who overshadowed the virgin Mary (see Luke 1:34-35). This was prophesied by Isaiah over 700 years before the event (see Isa. 7:14),⁵ and was fulfilled in due time according to the Gospel record (see Matt. 1:18-25). Jesus differs from us because of this unique event, having two natures but in one person. He was free from sin, protected by the Holy Spirit from the effect of Adam’s fall. Yet He would enter fully into the testings we have as human beings and would represent us before the heavenly tribunal. He was fully human, but not a mere man. Zech 9:9 presents Him as literally “being salvation.”

“Christ” (Gk. *Christos*) is the appellation that ties Jesus of Nazareth to the Old Testament prophecies about the Coming One. It translates the Hebrew

⁵ In Isa. 7:14, the Heb. Word for “virgin” is *almah*, a word always used of virgins of marriageable age (see Gen. 24:16, for example).

Mashiach, “Anointed One.” The term was used of God-anointed kings, but came to describe especially the prophesied Son of David who would come.⁶ Jeremiah 33 and Isaiah 9 and 11 look forward to the Anointed One who will come to bring deliverance and who will reign.

THE OFFICES OF CHRIST

Bridging the teaching of who Christ is and what He came to do is the conception of His divine offices. Three terms designate these offices. He is God’s anointed “Prophet,” “Priest,” and “King.” Each of these terms emphasizes the mediatorship of Christ between the Father of heaven and the people of earth.

The term “prophet” comes from the Greek *prophetes*, “one who speaks forth.”⁷ It became a technical term for one who speaks for God.⁸ It carries with it the notion of proclamation, preaching, and informing. Isaiah 42:1-7 speaks of Christ as the anointed Servant who will enlighten the nations, and Isaiah 11:2 and 61:1 speak of the Spirit of the Lord resting upon Him. The New Testament portrays Jesus as a “preacher” as well as a teacher⁹ and a healer (Matt. 9:35). He announced salvation to the poor (Luke 4:18-19). In Bible times the term “prophet” did not necessarily include the ability to look into the future. Prophets were simply speakers for God, and if God foretold the future to confirm or clarify their message, it was God, not the prophet, who saw the future and revealed it. The prophet was just a mouth for God to use. The prophets were also called seers because God let them see His message, sometimes in their minds, sometimes with dreams or visions.

Jesus, however, fulfilled the ministry of a prophet in the highest sense. He said, “These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me” (John 14:24). Particularly in the closing year of His public ministry, Jesus taught His disciples much about the events yet to come. Entire chapters of discourse in the Gospels, Matthew 24, for example, are futuristic prophecy. Clearly Jesus fulfilled the office of prophet. In the earliest days of His ministry, Jesus came proclaiming that what the Old Testament prophets had foreseen was being fulfilled in Him (see Luke 4:16-21). The Kingdom was already near in His person and ministry (see Matt. 4:17). The prophetic message was coupled with a call for repentance, and, as in the case of the Old Testament prophets, that call flowed out of a heart of love for the people and a desire to see the blessing of God on them.

Jesus Christ also fulfilled the office of priest. A priest is a specially consecrated individual who represents God to people, and people to God. Old Testament priests offered sacrifices for themselves and for the people to secure divine forgiveness and divine favor, and to celebrate their relationship with the Lord (see Heb. 8:3). In Christ, as the Book of Hebrews so beautifully elaborates the theme, one finds the Great High Priest, a perfect representative from among the people. Furthermore, He

⁶ See *The New Testament Greek-English Dictionary*, Sigma-Omega, vol. 16, The Complete Biblical Library (Springfield, Mo.: The Complete Biblical Library, 1991), 524-529, for an excellent discussion of this subject.

⁷ In the Old Testament it most often translates the Heb. *navi*’, which comes from an old word for “speaker.”

⁸ Or a god or goddess. There were prophets of the false god Baal and his consort, Asherah (1 Kings 18:19).

⁹ “Teacher” (Gk. *didaskalos*) is usually translated “Master,” KJV, meaning schoolmaster.

did not need to cleanse himself as the ordinary priests did, nor did He need to offer a sacrifice for himself. He himself became the perfect, pure, sinless sacrifice. He offered himself to God the Father as the atonement sufficient to cover, pay for, and forgive the sins of the whole world.

The office of king is appropriate to Christ as well. He is our Priest and our Atonement. He is our Lord and Master. But more than these, He is the One who has broken the forces of death, hell, and the grave, and is the Triumphant One. He will reign in majesty for the eternities unending! The Old Testament prophecies foretold a coming one who would unite in himself the functions of prophet, priest, and king. David was promised that there would be a kingdom without an end (2 Sam. 7:16). Isaiah looked through the lenses of prophetic vision and foresaw one who would bear the emblems of authority on His shoulder (Isa 9:6) and who would make the throne of David eternal (Isa. 9:7). The Book of Revelation pictures the Lamb of God in the final triumph reigning as King of kings (Rev. 5:6-13; 11:15). And now, in the interim, He sits at the right hand of the Father in the heavenly realms and reigns as Head of the Church (Eph. 1:22-23).

THE WORK OF CHRIST

Jesus Christ came to live a sinless life, to be an example of perfect righteousness, a model by which His disciples could gauge their own behavior. He was not only born sinless, but He lived without sinning (see Heb 4:15). An important term in this connection is “kenosis,” Jesus’ “self-emptying.” During His earthly sojourn, Jesus “emptied” (Gk. *ekenosen*), or divested, himself of the glory and privileges He enjoyed with the Father in past eternity (Phil. 2:7). Although there were fleeting occasions when His heavenly glory shone through, such as the spectacular Transfiguration on the mountain in Galilee (Matt. 17:1-13), much of His earthly ministry was accomplished in and by the power of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 10:38). He prayed that the glory would be restored (see John 17:5), and it was indeed restored after His ascension (see Acts 26:13). The great doctrine of the kenosis is given its fullest expression in Philippians 2:1-11.

Although Jesus came in a miraculous manner into this world, and although He lived a miraculous life, the central reason for His Incarnation is wrapped up in His death. First Corinthians 15:3 states it succinctly: “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.” Jesus came primarily to die. In a sense, the shadow of the Cross was over Him from the time of His birth (see Simeon’s prophecy to Mary in Luke 2:34-35). The Cross is the central event of all history. It is that which distinguishes Christianity from all other religious systems. Christianity is given its fullest significance not the by life and teachings of its founder, important as they are, but by His death. The four Gospels are not biographies in the ordinary sense. They rush through the life and teachings of Jesus to get to the events leading up to His death. For example, John gets to the last week, the Passion Week,¹⁰ in chapter 12, only halfway through the book. This shows the significance the Holy Spirit, through the Gospel writers, attached to this awesome spectacle. The Epistles are saturated with references to the Cross and to the meaning of the death of Christ. (A subsequent chapter will deal more specifically with the doctrine of Atonement.)

¹⁰ The term “passion” comes from the Low Latin *passio*, meaning “suffering.” “Christ’s passion” is a term for His sufferings between the Last Supper and His death on the Cross.

When Jesus said, “It is finished,” and died, His work for our redemption was complete. Only one thing more needed to be done: He was raised for our justification (see Rom. 4:25). The resurrection of Christ is the bold proclamation to the universe that the death of Christ was efficacious; that indeed the hosts of darkness had been conquered and that in triumph the victorious Christ had risen from the grave, making His resurrection the guarantee of ours. The great resurrection chapter of the Bible, 1 Corinthians 15, concludes with the ecstatic announcement: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.’ Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us victory through out Lord Jesus Christ!” (vv. 54-57).

It is important to emphasize that the resurrection of Jesus was a genuine bodily resurrection out of a real death. It is the cardinal miracle of the Bible upon which our faith and salvation rest. Those who categorically rule out the possibility of miracles in the universe try desperately to explain away the resurrection of Jesus. Some deny that He actually died, claiming that He merely “swooned” and recovered in the cool tomb. But a half-dead Jesus crawling out of the tomb could hardly have inspired the apostles to risk their lives proclaiming the gospel. Others claim that only His spirit was resurrected. But the disciples were able to touch Him (see John 20:27); He was not just a spirit, or ghost (see Luke 24:37-39). Still others say that Peter fell asleep on board the ship, dreamed he saw Jesus on the shore, and—still dreaming—he jumped overboard and walked in his sleep to the shore. When he came to, he saw the ashes of yesterday’s campfire someone had left, and it all seemed so real that he began telling people he had seen Jesus. This caused others to have mass hallucinations where they merely thought they saw the resurrected Jesus. But those who say this need a great deal of faith to believe Peter would not wake when hit the water, or that such mass hallucinations would convince all the disciples and the others who saw Jesus. Still others imply that the disciples in their enthusiasm lied about the facts. But, again, they would hardly have died for the gospel if they had known in their hearts they had lied.

Several unmistakable points must be borne in mind regarding the proof of a real resurrection of our Lord. The stone was rolled away from the tomb. But who would roll away the stone? The Jews and the Romans set a guard; they would not have done so. Certainly the soldiers knew the penalty would be death if they did. As for the disciples, they were afraid and in hiding. And the women who came did not have the strength to do so. The Bible’s answer that angels were responsible is the only sensible explanation.¹¹

The abundance of testimony from more than five hundred witnesses covering no less than ten recorded appearances of the postresurrection Lord is powerful confirmation of the actual event; when the Gospel accounts were written, any contemporaries who wished to take exception to their testimony could easily have done so (1 Cor. 15:6). There is no evidence that any were able to dispute the disciples. Further, apart from a genuine resurrection, one cannot adequately account for the dramatic change in the disciples. It would take more than mass hallucination to cause them to obey the Lord and stay in Jerusalem, waiting for the promised Holy Spirit. Again, the Jews failed to produce the body of the Lord—a favorite argument having been that the disciples stole the body and lied about the event. But it is not

¹¹ Frank Morrison, *Who Moved the Stone?* (London: Faber & Faber, 1930). The entire monograph is worth reading.

easy to get rid of a body, and there is no indication that the Jewish leaders commissioned anyone to search for it. On the contrary, they gave money to soldiers to lie about what had happened (see Matt. 28:11-15). When everything is objectively examined, there is simply no adequate explanation that accounts for the tiny Jerusalem church's survival, growth, and impact on world civilization—apart from the empty tomb.

The resurrection body of Jesus had several remarkable characteristics. The full understanding of what took place in the body of Jesus remains shrouded in a mystery that the Lord has not seen fit to unveil this side of eternity (see 1 Cor. 15:35-44). There are, however, some things that are told us. The Gospels disclose that the resurrection body of Jesus was real; it was the same body that had been entombed. He still had the ability to engage in physical activities appropriate to the human body. For instance, He ate food (see Luke 24:39-44). However, in addition to normal human capabilities, the resurrection body of our Lord was changed and had some unusual properties. Some of the usual limitations of the human body were gone. Peter saw the burial head cloth intertwined like a turban¹² and the linen wrapping still in place in the tomb, but apparently he did not understand at first. Then when John entered the tomb, "He saw and believed" (John 20:8). That is, he recognized that Jesus rose right through the wrappings, and consequently he believed (see John 20:6-8). Jesus also passed through locked doors to be with His disciples, and He vanished from the sight of the two who walked Him on the road to Emmaus. Perhaps the brief glimpses of Christ's resurrection body are indicative of the state of the glorified bodies which will be ours at the time of the final resurrection of the believers, when we shall all be changed (see 1 Cor. 15:51).

Forty days of appearances to the disciples following the Resurrection were ended with the ascension of Jesus. There on the Mount of Olives, opposite the city of Jerusalem, Jesus was taken up bodily while a great company of His disciples watched (see Acts 1:9,11). This final dramatic moment closed the period of the Incarnation in which the God-Man, Christ Jesus, participated in physical presence with people on earth. When the cloud hid Him from their sight, Jesus entered into heaven (see Heb 4:14; 1 Peter 3:22), where He took up a new phase of His ministry. The word of redemption had been successfully discharged: He had instructed His disciples carefully in the program He had initiated for them, the Church. They were also to wait for the promise of the Father, the Holy Spirit, who would continue Christ's work on earth through them. Now, with the phase of His work associated with humiliation and death over, His ascension inaugurated the beginning of a reign of exaltation.

We as believers receive several important benefits from the ascension and exaltation of Christ. The exalted Lord is now our friend and advocate at the right hand of the Father, engaging in the ministry of intercession on our behalf (see Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25; 1 John 2:1). He has entered into a new phase of His priestly ministry. With the atonement achieved, our Great High Priest now has sat down, which is evidence of His completed work, and pleads our cause in heaven. We have the assurance that "if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Further, He is our pledge, being already in heaven, that a place is being prepared for us there and that

¹² The Gk. word *entetuligmenon* is in the perfect tense, indicating it had been and still was in the same shape as when it was wrapped around His head.

He will see to it that there will be rooms enough for everyone (see John 14:1-3).¹³ And lastly, His exaltation is accompanied by His sending of the Holy Spirit to be “another Counselor” or Helper (Gk, *parakletos*, “helper,” “intercessor”¹⁴) to us (see John 14:16-26). Consequently, today, even though the Lord is separated from us physically, we can enjoy genuine union with Him through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, given to take the things of Christ and apply them to our hearts. In this very important sense, then, Jesus Christ is available to everyone today, no longer limited by the restrictions of physical appearance by which He operated during the time of His earthly ministry. These indeed are marvelous blessings available to us because of Christ’s ascension and exaltation.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the ways the Bible declares, recognizes, or reveals the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ?
2. How does the Bible show that Jesus during His life and ministry on earth was fully human as well as fully divine?
3. How could Jesus be Lord and Servant at the same time?
4. What is the importance of the Virgin Birth?
5. How did Jesus fulfill the offices of the anointed Prophet, Priest, and King during His ministry? How is He fulfilling them now? How will He fulfill them when He comes again?
6. In what sense did Jesus “empty himself” when He came to earth and took human form?
7. What are the evidences for a real bodily resurrection of Jesus?
8. In view of 1 John 3:2, what does the resurrection body of Christ indicate about the nature of our resurrection bodies?
9. What benefits for us result from the ascension and exaltation of Jesus?

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¹³ The word “rooms” comes from the Gk. *monai* and is derived from *meno*, which means to “remain,” “stay,” “dwell,” “continue,” “be permanent.” It indicates that though our stay on earth is temporary, our stay with the Lord will be permanent (cf. 1 Thess. 4:17). “Many” also indicates that God has not put a limit on the number of people who can come.

¹⁴ “Another” means “another of the same kind,” One just like himself. See Stanley M. Horton, “Paraclete,” *Paraclete* 1 (Winter 1967), 5-8.