

The Deity of Our Lord

by Olin Alfred Curtis

Jesus Christ's self-consciousness was centered on his mission of redemption, which involved self-sacrifice, and his relation to men, the moral law, and God.

Scripture: John 1:1, John 10:30, Philippians 2:6, Colossians 2:9, Hebrews 1:3, Revelation 1:8

Topics: "Christology", "Divinity Of Christ"

Description

Olin Alfred Curtis preaches about the early church's struggle to defend the deity of Jesus Christ against the Arian heresy, emphasizing the importance of maintaining the belief in Christ's divinity as essential to the Christian faith and the significance of redemption. He highlights the Athanasian Creed's assertion of Jesus being 'very God of very God' and 'of one substance with the Father' as a crucial defense against the Arian denial of Christ's eternal nature and necessary relation to God. Curtis addresses the modern Christological peril of agnostic movements in Christology, warning against the danger of reducing Christ to a mere moral example or revelation of God, which undermines the sacrificial and redemptive core of the Christian faith.

Transcript

At last the weapon which they had been seeking, to cut off the head of their enemy, was suddenly drawn from his own scabbard. A letter was produced from Eusebius of Nicomedia, in which he declared that to assert the Son to be uncreated would be to say that he was "of one substance" *homoousion* with the Father. . . . The letter produced a violent excitement. There was the very test for which they were in search. The letter was torn in pieces to mark their indignation, and the phrase which he had pledged himself to reject became the phrase which they pledged themselves to adopt.

Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, Eastern Church, p. 228.

. . . And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, only begotten that is to say, of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made, both things in heaven and things in earth--who for us men and for our salvation came down and was made flesh, and was made man, suffered, and rose again on the third day; went up into the heavens, and is to come again to judge the quick and dead.

Translation of the passage as first read at Nicæa.

There are five methods by which it is possible to construct an argument for the deity of our Lord; but I shall not make exact use of any one of these methods. Indeed, my aim is not to build a formal, logical argument of any kind, but rather to show how closely our Lord's divinity is related to his work in redemption. A word should be said concerning the use of Saint John's gospel. To trace all the windings of the criticism of the fourth gospel is not feasibly within the scope of the plan of this book. A bald personal assertion must suffice. A Christian scholar can master the entire range of critical discussion down to the latest contentions of Abbè Loisy, and still have unshaken confidence in the Johannine authorship and in the reliability of the fourth gospel as a record of the words and deeds of our Saviour. The best Christian scholarship will never give up this invaluable, this greatest gospel. I shall, therefore, in my discussion, make not even the slightest discrimination in favor of the synoptic gospels. Perhaps, however, it may be well to add that the force of this discussion would be essentially the same, even though not one passage were quoted from Saint John.

The Consciousness of Our Lord as Related to Redemption

His Mission.

1. It is clearly in the consciousness of our Lord that his mission was to save men. His full conception of his work is gathered up in these words, recorded by Saint Luke (19.10): "For the Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost." If it be urged that he came to establish "the kingdom of God" the answer is that his very conception of that kingdom (as related to men) was not merely philanthropic but actually redemptional. The personal entrance into that kingdom was only possible by being born anew (Saint John 3.3). And sinners were called to repentance (Saint Luke 5.32).
2. For this mission of redemption he had given up all the glory of his preexistent state. (Read all of the seventeenth chapter of Saint John's gospel and compare it with the passage in the Epistle to the Philippians, 2.5-11.)
3. In carrying out this mission of redemption he is to lay down his life for men. In the tenth chapter of Saint John's gospel read the comparison of himself with the "Good Shepherd."
4. More definitely, this laying down his life was to be a ransom paid -- a ransom for many. "For the Son of man also came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Saint Mark 10.45; also Saint Matt. 20.28; and compare with Saint Matt. 26.28).

If we now put together these four points, surely we must affirm as much as this: It was clearly in our Lord's self-consciousness that he had, in a spirit of self-sacrifice, given up the glory of his original estate and come into this world with the one purpose to ransom men from sin by means of his own death.

His Relation to Men

5. Jesus ever regards himself as the final authority for men. Notice the tone of authority in his forms of speech: "Verily, verily, I say unto you;" "Ye have heard how it hath been said, but I say unto you." Sometimes the strangest thing in his speech is not its content, but its manner, the way it manifests an absolute consciousness that he himself is the last court of appeal. (See Saint Matt. 5.18-39 and Saint John 14.2, 3.)
6. Jesus regards himself as the supreme Master of men. As supreme Master he demands obedience. "And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?" (Saint Luke 6.46; compare with Saint

John 21. 22.)

7. As a further revelation of the consciousness of mastership over men, notice our Lord's claim upon their love "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Saint Matt. 10.37; and, as a significant background, read the passage in Saint Matt. 22.37-39).

8. In relation to man's spiritual needs, Jesus regards himself as the ultimate and perfect supply. "Jesus answered and said unto her, Every one that drinketh of this water shall thirst again: but whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up unto eternal life" (Saint John 4.13, 14; compare with Saint John 10.10).

9. Jesus regards himself as the Race-Man. Of all the discussions bearing upon the term "Son of man," in its meaning as used by our Lord, the discussion by Professor Stevens, in his Theology of the New Testament, seems to me to be the most nearly satisfactory. But, for my purpose, this term "Son of man" has no large importance; and for the sufficient reason that we already have, in the four facts noted in this connection, a clear revelation of our Saviour's consciousness of his peculiar relation to men. When we try to state this peculiar relation in a compact word we can do no better than to say that Jesus Christ is conscious of being the Race-Man. On the one side, he owns the race. It is his race in such a final way that he has the absolute right to make his claim upon all men. No man, high or low, rich or poor, this or that, can escape him. In his consciousness there is a great racial grasp. And, then, on the other hand, he belongs to the whole race. Every man has a property in him. It is his supreme business to live with men and for men, all men. Therefore, there is a fitness in his redemptive work. It is not extraneous. It does not come at men from the outside. Our Saviour is not a stranger.

His Relation to the Moral Law. Now, holding fast to what we have, namely, our Lord's consciousness of the redemptive purpose of his mission and of his peculiar relation to mankind, it becomes exceedingly important to discover the content of his moral consciousness. How was he, in consciousness, related to the moral law under which man must be redeemed, if redeemed at all?

10. The first thing to be marked here is that Jesus Christ never manifested any consciousness of being himself a sinner. This point does not in the least depend upon the minute exegesis of such a text as that in Saint John's gospel (8.46), where our Lord exclaims, "Which of you convicteth me of sin?" It is a matter of personal bearing. Read the record in the gospels from end to end, and you become positive that Jesus felt perfectly free from sin.

11. Even as the separate texts are overarched by the general bearing of Jesus, so his general bearing is overarched by the one fact that he claimed to have the moral authority to forgive sin. But that ye may know that the Son of man hath authority on earth to forgive sins (Saint Matt. 9.6; read the entire passage in Saint Mark 2.5-12).

12. But all -- the separate texts, the general bearing, and the forgiveness of sin -- are overarched by our Lord's assertion that he alone is to be the final Judge of men. "For neither doth the Father judge any man, but he hath given all judgment unto the Son" (Saint John 5.22). "For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then shall he render unto every man according to his deeds" (Saint Matt. 16.27).

With these three cumulative points before us, we cannot say less than this: In his mission of redemption Jesus Christ regarded himself as the embodiment of the moral perfection and authority of God's absolute law. His bearing and utterance were precisely as if in consciousness he felt that he himself and the moral law were interchangeable equivalents.

His Relation to God. This surprising discovery of the content of our Lord's moral consciousness leads us to dare to ask a most crucial question: Did the consciousness of Jesus, in carrying out his mission of redemption, affirm any peculiar relation to God? If so, what was that relation?

13. Jesus regards himself as alone able to understand God the Father and to reveal him. "All things have been delivered unto me of my Father: and no one knoweth the Son, save the Father; neither doth any know the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son willeth to reveal him " (Saint Matt. 11.27).

14. Jesus regards himself as the one and only way unto God the Father. "Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one cometh unto the Father, but by me' (Saint John 14.6).

15. Jesus regards himself as so essentially one with the Father (*ego kai ho pater hen esmen*) that having seen Jesus one hath seen the Father. "Jesus saith unto him, Have I been so long time with you, and dost thou not know me, Philip? he that hath seen me hath seen the Father; how sayest thou, Show us the Father? Believest thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father in me? the words that I say unto you I speak not from myself: but the Father abiding in me doeth his works" (Saint John 14.9, 10; 10.25-33). The Ritschlian view that Christ was conscious of merely an ethical union with God, an agreement with God in moral purpose, seems to me to be superficial even as isolated exegesis. But we cannot rest in any isolated exegesis, the passage must be treated in harmony with all the other claims of Jesus. So treated, it is evident that Jesus held in consciousness such a fundamental relation to God the Father as to be able to be, in the redemptive work, a complete equivalent of the Father's authority and nature. Jesus does not regard himself as a mere delegate from God, but as the actual presence of God to accomplish their salvation.

16. In Christ's estimate the Holy Spirit is peculiarly related both to our Lord's redemptive ministry and to our Lord himself. Not only does the Holy Spirit wait for the end of that ministry, but he is to be sent by Jesus himself. "Nevertheless I tell you the truth: It is expedient for you that I go away; for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I go, I will send him unto you. And he, when he is come, will convict the world in respect of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment" (Saint John I 6; read the entire chapter). Godet's comment here is so penetrating that I will quote it: "His departure was the condition of his restoration to his divine state, and this would enable him to send the Holy Spirit. It is the same idea which we meet with in 7.39: 'The Spirit was not yet; because Jesus was not yet glorified.' That Jesus might send the Spirit, he must possess him as his own personal life, and that as man, since it is to men that he is to impart him." This, though, is deeper than we now need to go. What I wish to emphasize is that Jesus Christ, while on the earth, working out his redemptive plan, was conscious of being the condition of the redemptional activity of the Holy Spirit and also of being the personal authority to start that activity.

His Consciousness After His Resurrection

17. We have caught glimpses of our Saviour's redemptional consciousness, here and there, during his active ministry; but the inquiry naturally arises, After his resurrection, does he manifest the same consciousness, the same conception of himself? "And when they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came to them and spake unto them, saying, All authority hath been given unto me in

heaven and on earth. 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: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Saint Matt. 28.17-20; compare with Saint Mark 16.14-16; also with Saint Luke 24.44-49; also with Acts 1.6-8). The rationalistic contention that this passage reveals an altogether different attitude from that of Jesus before his crucifixion is such a contention as we would expect from men who have never caught the spirit and progressive method in our Lord's mission of redemption. But I am quite sure that to the real Christian consciousness this most extraordinary passage effectually appeals as an indorsement, in succinct expression, of the same redemptional consciousness which our Saviour had during his active ministry. The passage is neither more nor less than the conjoining, for the establishment and future work of the Christian church, of all the tremendous claims which our Lord had ever made.

By an examination of our Lord's miracles and of his conception of his relation to Old Testament prophecy we could enlarge our study of his consciousness; but we have done enough to show three things: First, he regarded himself as on a mission of redemption; second, this mission to be accomplished by self-sacrifice culminating in his death; third, this sacrifice having peculiar significance from his racial relation to man, from his self-identification with the moral law, and from his self-identification with God. As the Son of God, as the embodiment of all moral concern, and as the Race-Man, he, having sacrificed his original estate, will now die that he may redeem mankind -- that is the intrinsic veinage of the self-consciousness of Jesus Christ.

The Apostolic Consciousness

For our limited plan it is not necessary to consider every expression in the New Testament of the apostolic mind; it is quite sufficient to note the beginning and then the fullness of the consciousness. In each instance, the question would be, When this apostle became conscious of self, what were the important, the characteristic things, he held? Or, more simply, what were his primary convictions?

The First Trace in Saint Peter. In looking at Saint Peter in the book of Acts, we should not expect too much. He was a great apostle, but he was in a fever. He had been well-nigh overwhelmed by the rush of mighty events -- the trial and death of Jesus, the resurrection, the appearance of Christ, the ascension, the "tongues parting asunder, like as of fire," on the day of Pentecost. His very boldness is a hot, violent thing almost certain to obscure the inner vision; and no utterance of his at this time is likely to contribute much to Christian doctrine. And yet for this very reason, for the very reason that he is in such agitation, his consciousness is to us of large worth. For we want to find out the characteristic inner seizures of an apostle in all the upheaval at the very beginning of the Christian church. The points which stand out clearly are these:

1. While Saint Peter blamed the Jews, he regarded the crucifixion of Christ as no accident, but a part of the divine plan. "Being delivered up by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2 23). "But the things which God foreshowed by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ should suffer, he thus fulfilled" (3.18).
2. While Jesus is "a man approved of God" (2.22), yet Saint Peter sees in Christ's name the authority, the divine power, the dynamic finality of redemption from sin. "And Peter said unto them, Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (2.38). "And in none other is there salvation: for neither is there any other name

under heaven, that is given among men, wherein we must be saved" (4. 12).

3. But there is more. In Saint Peter's consciousness there is more than that Jesus Christ is a man approved of God and chosen beforehand to suffer and die as the one potent means for the salvation of men. Saint Peter calls Jesus "the Prince of Life" (3. 15). Also he calls him "both Lord and Christ" (2.36). Saint Peter works miracles only in Christ's name. "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk" (3. 6). The gift of the Holy Spirit he connects with the name of Christ (2.38, already quoted). And, finally, Saint Peter thinks of Jesus as exalted by the right hand of God: "Him did God exalt with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, to give repentance to Israel, and remission of sins" (5.31; 2.33).

Not for a moment would we assert that we find in these three points any more than a moiety of what we found in the consciousness of our Lord. But is it not clear that we have here the beginning of the same thing. Was Saint Peter not beginning to realize that Christ's mission was the redemption of man by self-sacrifice, culminating in death; and that this sacrifice was not made by a mere man, but by one peculiarly related to men and to righteousness and to God? May we not say that Saint Peter's consciousness was, at least in prophetic outline, a copy of his Master's consciousness?

The Fullness in Saint John. Leaving out Saint Paul, whom I wish to reserve for our discussion of the atonement, the fullness of the apostolic consciousness is best seen in Saint John. And if we take Saint John as revealed in the book of the Revelation we find a certain maturity, a certain richness and ripeness in Christian conviction, not to be found in any other apostolic writing. The book of Acts might be called the spring of apostolic experience, Saint Paul's epistles the summer, and the book of the Revelation the autumn -- when ripe fruits drop as "gentle airs come by." I will make a brief analysis of Saint John's doctrine of the Lamb of God.

The Lamb Slain. The figure of the Lamb was not, as many seem to think, selected mainly to suggest the gentleness of Christ. Indeed, this conception of a gentle Christ is, just now, a reality so overemphasized as to be almost lifted into unreality. Saint John is thinking, not so much of a lamb, as of a lamb slain. "And I saw in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain" (Rev. 5.6).

The Blood of the Lamb. The conception of the Lamb slain is involved also in the expression "the blood of the Lamb"; but "the blood of the Lamb" is most definitely related to the salvation of men from sin. Such a connection is established even in the first chapter -- "Unto him that loveth us, and loosed us from our sins by his blood" (1.5). And then of those before God in white robes the elder says: "These are they that come out of the great tribulation, and they washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (7.14). And speaking of the conquest over "the accuser of our brethren," Saint John says: "And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb" (12.11).

The Lamb and the Book. As to the meaning of this "book written within and on the back, close sealed with seven seals" (5.1), many opinions have been given; but, with any possible view, Saint John is paying an extraordinary tribute to the power of the Lamb. He alone can open the peculiar book. And I think we may safely say more, even that Saint John himself furnishes the clue to his meaning. A little later, in the ninth verse of this fifth chapter, we read: "And they sing a new song, saying, Worthy art thou to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and didst purchase unto God with thy blood men of every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation." This, to me, means, when put into simple phrase, that the Lamb of God alone has power to save men, and he has this power because he died for their sins. That

is, the strange, difficult book was the problem of human redemption. And, further, the elaborate description of the book is but a figurative way of saying that the moral difficulties of redemption were almost insuperable. In fact, all through Saint John's peculiar imagery, there is a most intense moral emphasis. His throne of God is nothing whatever but the moral law.

The Lamb and the Redeemed. The first thing to note as to the redeemed is that they do not come out of the twelve tribes alone. "After these things I saw, and behold, a great multitude, which no man could number, out of every nation and of all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb" (7. 9). Thus, redemption is lifted out of ethnic locality and given a racial extent. Again, these redeemed men are in a relation of loyalty and fellowship with the Lamb. "These are they that follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth" (14.4). And, again and again, we have the idea that the redeemed absolutely belong to the Lamb by purchase. They "were purchased from among men" (14.4, etc.).

The Lamb and the Throne of God. In almost every part of the entire book the Lamb sustains a peculiar relation to the enthroned God. And the emphasis of this peculiar relation culminates in the ascription of worship "unto him that sitteth on the throne and unto the Lamb": "And every created thing which is in the heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and on the sea, and all things that are in them, heard I saying, Unto him that sitteth on the throne, and unto the Lamb, be the blessing, and the honor, and the glory, and the dominion, for ever and ever" (5.13).

If now we are willing to make due allowance for the difference in style of speech, I am sure that we can see in this doctrine of the slain Lamb an expression of essentially the same redemptional consciousness which was manifest in the life and sayings of our Lord. To Saint John our Lord's mission was redemption; this redemption was accomplished by a sacrificial death; our Lord's relation to men, in this redemption, was as wide as the human race itself; and the redeemed will treat their Redeemer with precisely that worship which they will pay to God upon his throne. At the end of this short study of the apostolic consciousness the one point which I most care to lift up is that the apostles, from first to last, did not look upon Jesus mainly as their teacher, their master, but rather as their Saviour from sin; and because he was their Saviour their natural tendency was to exalt him into the moral power and absolute nature of God himself. They did not get at the deity of Christ philosophically, but redemptively. They did not even try to explain redemption theologically by ... Christ divine. It was much more simple. Jesus Christ had saved them from sin, and in all the glory of the new life in Christ their whole being rushed out to him as to their God. This explains why we have no more in the apostolic utterance; and it also explains why we have so much. The absolute deity of our Lord is surely in the message of the apostles, but it is in that message not as systematic theology, but as a redemptional experience.

The Problem of the Early Church

Now let us come down to the beginning of the fourth century and see if we can make real to our minds the Christian problem. At the very start we need to remember that the Christian church had inherited the rigid monotheism of the Old Testament. That "Jehovah our God is one Jehovah" (Deut. 6. 4) was to the typical Christian as authoritative as ever it was to any man of Israel. Indeed, it can be shown that a basal monotheistic conception runs all through not only the writings of the Greek fathers, but also the New Testament itself. Profoundly considered, the New Testament is as monotheistic as is the Old Testament. Therefore, with such a didactic inheritance, the early Christian church, to exalt Jesus Christ into the Godhead, must have had a motive forceful enough to overcome a most positive natural inclination. Let us, then, instantly banish from our minds the notion that we are dealing with men who are preoccupied with a

doctrinal readiness to deify Jesus Christ.

But with this monotheism they had inherited precisely what we have been considering, that is, our Lord's conception of his own mission in its aim and method and relations; and this conception essentially repeated in the manifest consciousness of the inspired apostles. Of course, the apostles could not, for the leaders of the early church, add anything to the authority of their Lord; but the apostolic teaching could and did make them more sure in their interpretation of the real meaning of Christ's life and words. Had no apostle ever reaffirmed, so to speak, the consciousness of Christ, the psychological situation, and the practical situation, would have been somewhat different for the early church. It would have been Martin Luther's situation, only many times more perplexing.

Their relation to the Scripture was, however, not artificial, but dynamic. It was mediated through their own Christian consciousness. And their Christian consciousness was resultant from their Christian experience. And the center of their Christian experience was a vital relation to their risen Redeemer. When now we search out their own personal bearing, in this vital relation to Jesus, we find it to be not merely one of faith, but also one of actual worship. There can be no question about this. Worship of Christ was so common to the Christian daily habit of life that Tertullian, in writing his Apology, deems it necessary to defend the practice (xxi). Canon Bright says: "All through the antenice period, Christians who knew as well as any Jew could have told them that the Divine Unity was the root-truth of true religion, did one thing which spoke decisively as to the purport of their creed. With equal deliberation and fervor, habitually and as a matter of course, throughout life and in the face of death, clergy and people, learned and unlearned, alike and together, worshiped the crucified, risen, and glorified Jesus as their Lord and their God."

"The sea was heaving as if in the hours before a storm!" And when the storm burst, it was, for the Christian faith, the most crucial moment in the entire history of the church. Every Christian man should be trained to understand the conflict with Arianism just as every citizen of the republic should be trained to understand the Declaration of Independence. Allow me to lift the struggle out of its confusing nomenclature. Essentially the situation was this: First, the one nerve of the whole matter is that these Christian men had been saved from sin. Seize that fact with all your strength, or you will never comprehend this mighty battle. Second, this salvation from sin they absolutely associated with Jesus Christ and his atonement. Third, they had inherited their Saviour's own interpretation of the relation existing between his redemptive work and the intrinsic peculiarity of his person. Fourth, this consciousness of our Lord they found essentially repeated in the whole body of apostolic experience, the repetition gaining in force and completeness from first to last. Fifth, this inheritance from Christ and his apostles exactly fitted and satisfied their own Christian consciousness which was resultant from their own Christian experience. Sixth, out of this combination of features they had gained a conception of Christ which they spontaneously expressed by worshiping him even as they worshiped God. This is a fair practical statement of the inner situation; and it all can be gathered up into a sentence: While up to this time they had no metaphysical view (the most of them) of Jesus Christ, yet, in their redemptional experience, they so regarded him that their hearts went out to him in full worship. Now, Arianism offered to these redeemed men, worshiping Christ -- what? A creature -- a being who actually had commenced to live; a being made by a swift, potent volition of Almighty God; a being that could be duplicated -- yes, duplicated as often as God might wish to will it -- duplicated as easily as archangels or men or planets can be duplicated -- Arianism offered to these redeemed men worshiping Christ that creature! Surely they had to reject the offer. In the name of all they had inherited, and all they had experienced, and all they had done, they had to reject the offer. Their rejection of all creaturehood in Christ was not only a redemptional

consistency, but also a redemptional necessity. It was not so much their theology which was in danger as their Christian experience itself. Indeed, I myself believe that had Arianism been triumphant the Christian faith would have been swept entirely away. Our experience with later depreciations of our Lord's person indicates what would have taken place on a large scale, namely, the gradual devitalization of personal experience in Christ, and then, with this devitalization, the rapid yielding to rationalistic demand until every Christian doctrine was emptied of its original meaning.

Now we can understand why the Athanasians were obliged to go into metaphysics. The Arian offer was too fundamental in its relations, and too subtle in its statements, and too ingenious in its scriptural defense, to be met on the surface in a practical way. There is nothing so slippery as a heresy trying to enter the church. To check it, the practical mind and the Scripture method have ever been completely helpless. There is not one Christian truth which can, be fully defended against heresy, save by using more or less of metaphysics, for every final meaning lies deep in metaphysics. Every Arian contention had an important metaphysical implication. The very idea of creaturehood itself is at last a metaphysical idea.

Let us, then, come at the pith of this metaphysical work of the Athanasians, and try to make it clear to our modern way of thinking. The pith of the matter is in these few words: "Very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father." The Greek reads thus: *theon alethinon ek theou alethinou, gennethenta, ou poethenta, homoousion toi patri*. The Latin reads thus: *Deum verum de Deo vero, natum, non factum, unius substantiae cum Patre.* To bring out the significance of these words, I will make a somewhat arbitrary analysis of them. There are two statements, and then each statement is briefly explained by a peculiar phrase. The first statement is that Jesus Christ is "very God," or, as a theologian today would say, absolutely God. The explanation of this first statement is in the peculiar phrase "being of one substance with the Father." Upon this term substance a surprising amount of learned research has been expended with a small amount of philosophical insight. The instant meaning of the word is of little concern, for it was nothing but a weapon, and an accidental weapon at that, to protect an underlying and extremely important idea, namely, that the Father and the Son are what they are by means of one and the same organism; that they are therefore, structurally necessary to each other, so that neither can exist at all without the other.

The second statement, indicating the method of this organic divine life, is that Jesus Christ, the Son, is "of very God." The explanation of this second statement is in the peculiar phrase "begotten, not made." This explanation is really twofold: First, there is the term "begotten," which evidently had come from Saint John's "only begotten." (See Saint John's gospel 1.14, 18; and 3.16; and 1 John 4.9.) Then this term is itself further and negatively explained by the expression "not made."

As if they had said: Jesus Christ is of God, but not in the sense that a creature is of God by optional creation. Christ is begotten, but not made. Here again they were compelled to use the weapon at hand, but it is plain enough what they meant. They were trying to say that our Lord has a derived being, but the derivation is necessary and without beginning and without resultant inferiority. The Father is the causal ground of the Son's existence, but the Father does not choose to will the Son into existence; he must eternally do so by the very process of his own eternal life.

This causing the existence of the Son is the method by which the Father is the Father, and without being the Father he could not exist at all. It is loose speech to call this process of begetting the Son creation, I think; but we may do so, if we are only careful to insist that it is necessary and eternal creation. Many times, and even in recent years, we have been told that this eternal generation, or begetting, of the Son of

God is empty verbiage, a sort of theological rhetoric, incapable of conception by the human mind.

I entirely fail to respond to the objection; and I fail to comprehend how any thinking man, familiar with the struggle over the Athanasian contention, can ever have even the slightest difficulty in clearly grasping the meaning of Athanasius. Surely we may conceive of two real persons; both of them without beginning; both of them alike in attributes, so that neither one of them is inferior to the other; and yet one of them is the cause, furnishes the power by which the other one has all his life; and then we may conceive that the causal person lives only by giving -- just as the caused person lives only by receiving; and thus they exist by means of one and the same organism.

And, now that I am at the point, I will dare to affirm that this eternal generation of the Son is not only conceivable, it is also one of the most fruitful conceptions in all Christian thinking. It helps us to understand all those sayings of Christ where, at one stroke, he insists upon both his equality with the Father and his dependence upon the Father, for these sayings reach widely beyond our Saviour's temporary condition of humiliation. And not only this, the Athanasian conception helps us to enter into the very atmosphere of the plan of redemption.

Devotionally, to a Christian man, this supreme Christian creed is of more worth than The Imitation of Christ. The problem of the early church, given in a word, was to protect, under perilous attack, the whole significance of their redemptional experience in Jesus Christ. And they did this, in full consistency with all their Christian opinions, by maintaining that our Redeemer, Jesus Christ, is, in his own person, eternally, necessarily, and absolutely God. It was the greatest piece of work ever done by uninspired men.

The Modern Christological Peril

The Arians are gone, but their equivalent is still here. The modern agnostic movement in Christology I can but regard as a most serious attack upon the deity of our Lord, and, through that, upon the entire significance of redemption. And the extreme peril of the attack lies in two things: First, that our leaders in the practical work of the church are so occupied, so busy with large affairs, that they do not realize the nature of the attack; and, second, that some of our greatest teachers and writers have honestly made up their minds, under the pressure of the new demands of science, that the old Christology is now untenable, even if it ever had any reality to the Christian mind. It is one of those critical periods when a small man can be pardoned for wishing there were some process by which he could for a few years become Athanasius.

Fairly to bring before you this agnosticism in Christology, I will quote a passage from an editorial in one of our influential, nonsectarian, religious journals, a passage which I have selected out of a large number of statements equally pertinent, because it is perfectly steeped in genuine spiritual quality. That is, I want you to see the agnostic bearing in its loftiest spiritual mood. The passage reads as follows: "I will not and I cannot enter into polemical discussions about him [Christ]; I will not and I cannot enter into metaphysical analysis of him.

I have no capacity to define with fine phrases his relation to the Infinite and the Eternal God, and I have no wish to do so. I rejoice in the mysteries of his being which I cannot solve. But to be like Jesus Christ is my deepest and sincerest desire, to have some share in the work he is doing is my supremest ambition; in his teaching I find the sum of all spiritual truth, in his spirit the secret of all life, and in himself an object of love and reverence such that all I have is too little to give to him.

If I try to put this experience into a form of words, I can find no better phrase than to say that I believe that the Eternal Presence, whom no one can see or comprehend, manifested himself in this one human life that all might see and comprehend him, and that through him all might come to be sharers of his life and conformed to his image" [*italics mine*]. Any student remembering Professor Ritschl's remarkable chapter on "The Doctrine of Christ's Person and Lifework" will note at once that in this editorial utterance we have an expression of one side of the Ritschlian view of "the Godhead of Christ."

The Ritschlian view, very briefly stated, is this: Christ is divine in the sense that he has the value of God in the Christian experience. When we analyze this value we find two things, namely, that Jesus is "the manifest type of spiritual lordship over the world" and "the perfect revealer of God." That is, we ascribe deity to Christ because he shows us how to master the world and because he is to us in our religious experience a perfect revelation of God. Concerning the last point Ritschl says: "As Bearer of the perfect revelation, Christ is given us that we may believe on him."

When we do believe on him, we find him to be the Revealer of God." But when we ask for more, when we ask what Christ really is in fundamental relation to God the Father, or what Christ is in himself, say, whether he is a creature or not, then Professor Ritschl gives us such an agnostic answer as we already have in the editorial quoted. It is true that the Ritschlian answer has, to many, a profounder appearance because it is related by manipulation to the Kantian theory of knowledge.

But this Kantian theory of knowledge actually adds an extra burden to the agnostic position, for the theory is weak in itself. To make hiatus between the action of a thing and the thing in itself is nothing but gratuity in philosophy. It is much more reasonable to hold that when we have the work of a thing we have the thing at work. In spite of the great name of Kant behind it, this positing a ground of action which is not actually in the action is a purely arbitrary performance.

To meet the Ritschlian Christology from the standpoint of a theory of knowledge, I would contend that if Jesus Christ has for men the complete value of God, either he must be a sheer automaton, a projected theophany, or he must be God himself. He could not be a free man, he could not be a creature, for no creature, however inspired, however helped, can remain in self-consciousness and act beyond the range of the finite. Either the free personality of Jesus must be given up or his absolute Godhead must be maintained.

But my main concern is not with the Ritschlian theory of knowledge, nor even with the Ritschlian theology by itself, but only with this agnostic Christology, however and wherever manifest. And I am concerned with this agnostic Christology, not as a scientific theologian, looking at its bearing upon this or that speculation in a system of doctrine, but as an ordinary Christian man, looking at its bearing upon the Christian experience in redemption. You cannot transform our Saviour into an interrogative and not do violence to the whole extent of the redemptional consciousness, from that of the man who has found forgiveness and peace in Christ today, back through the Christian centuries, back through the apostles, to our Lord's own conception of his mission and his person. This, though, is not all. This agnosticism tends to empty the atonement for sin of its profoundest ethical and sacrificial meaning. This meaning is deeper than any of our theories, and more important than all our theories -- it is the root -- peculiarity of the Christian faith and it is this: God, in his awful holiness, so loved men that he gave, out of his own being, his eternal, uncreated Son to save them from sin unto everlasting life. Therefore, our salvation has come only by the most costly self-sacrifice on the part of God the Father. And in this expensive self-sacrifice in the name of moral regard and love lies the ethical quality as well as the evidence of infinite love. But once hold that Jesus

Christ was a creature, and you have thrown all this holy costliness away. And this agnosticism says that it cannot tell whether Christ was a creature or not. We must have a Christology that can tell, or violate, and then vitiate, the Christian experience in redemption. It is not systematic theology, but the vitality of the Christian life, which is at stake.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/olin-alfred-curtis/the-deity-of-our-lord/>

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