

Our Lord Jesus Christ*

Part One

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“He said to them, but who do you say I am? And Simon Peter answered, you are the Christ, the son of the living God.” — Matthew 16:16

These words distinctly explain the subject before us. The question asked is exactly that which we now ask, Who do the Scriptures say that Jesus Christ is? And the answer given is exactly the same that we, as Unitarian believers, would give. We take the words in their fullest meaning, and adopt them as the confession of our faith. “He is the Christ, the Son of the living God.” In these words, not only the statement of our belief is contained, but also the argument on which it rests. The word “Christ” means anointed. It is in Greek the same as “Messiah” in Hebrew, and implies that Jesus was anointed by God with the Holy Spirit and with power, to become a prince and a savior, a prophet and a judge. It implies, therefore, very high distinction, but at the same time a distinction conferred by one higher than himself.

He is also “the Son of God,” a phrase elsewhere bestowed upon prophets and righteous men, but here used with peculiar solemnity — “the Son of the living God” — and with peculiar meaning, the same as when he is called “the beloved Son,” or “the only begotten Son” of his father. Such words, I think, announce peculiar exaltation, peculiar nearness to God. I doubt if we can at present understand their full meaning. To me, when taken in connection with

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other expressions used by our Savior concerning himself, they convey an idea of mystery, of union with God inexplicably close; a mystery into which we can but imperfectly penetrate, because it is but imperfectly revealed. But at the same time, while the expression conveys the idea of an unknown exaltation, it distinctly implies derivation and dependence. If words mean anything — if we are to use them according to their intelligible meaning — the Son owes his existence to the Father, and cannot therefore be self-existent. The very idea of sonship is of derivation, and is therefore inconsistent with the doctrines both of identity and of equality. If words mean anything, he who is the Son of the living or supreme God cannot be himself the supreme God, but must be derived from Him, and dependent on Him.

In the statement now given, I have expressed my whole belief concerning Christ. In the words of Peter, I say, “He is the Christ, the Son of the living God.” With that confession of faith Jesus was satisfied; for he said, “You are blessed, Simon, son of Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed it to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” It is, then, not only the opinion of the Apostles, confirmed by Christ, but it is also the direct inspiration of the Father in heaven. We have reason, therefore, to be satisfied with it. We adopt it, word for word, as the confession of faith in this church, and are willing to receive no other. It constitutes us Unitarians. My task is to show its meaning more fully, and to prove that it is taught not only in the words of this text, but everywhere else in the Bible.

First of all, you will observe, and I call your attention particularly to it, that those who accuse us of believing that Christ is a mere man are in error. They are prejudiced or misinformed. If by a mere man they mean one like ourselves, or like the prophets of the olden time, Moses, or Isaiah, or Ezekiel, or John the Baptist, the charge is entirely untrue. I know of no Unitarians who hold such a belief. There may be individuals who receive it, as there are individuals in the Presbyterian Church who believe in infant damnation; but I hope they are few in both cases. You will also find, among nominal Unitarians, some who have almost no faith at all; who hold to Jesus only as they might hold to Socrates. I pass no sentence upon them, for it is not our part to sit in judgment or to pronounce anathemas; but I do say that they are not to be taken as the exponents of the Unitarian faith. I feel satisfied, from observation which has been very extended, that there is no denomination in which Christ is more heartily received than in our own. A vulgar prejudice has been sometimes excited against us, by calling Unitarianism the half-way house to infidelity; but I believe that it has been the means of saving more persons from infidelity than any other form of belief. It addresses

itself to thinking men and encourages them to think independently, but it does not make shipwreck of faith. It receives Christ as the divine master and guide, but at the same time proves his doctrines to be consistent with enlightened reason.

Unitarians, as a body of believers, everywhere, agree in the belief that Christ is the special messenger of God; that his mission was divine; that his character was sinless; that his authority was so directly from God that whatever he taught is the teaching of the Father. "For he spake not of himself, but as the Father gave him commandment, so he taught." He was divine, therefore, in his mission, in his character, and in his authority. This is not the description of a mere man. Consider only the distinction of absolute freedom from sin, to say nothing of his superhuman wisdom and power; how completely does that distinction alone place him by himself! What nearness to God does it give him! We can but imperfectly conceive it. Our own sinfulness is so great; it is so inherent in our nature, so inseparable from the development of our thoughts and affections, that we but imperfectly understand its debasing influence. I believe that, if we could this day be absolutely freed from sin, we should be lost in amazement at the height to which we would rise, and the comparative degradation in which we now stand.

The most essential point in the Christian faith is the degree of Christ's authority to speak in the name of God. If the Scriptures say truly that to him the Spirit was given without measure, and that he has power to give eternal life to whom he will, this alone is enough to make his religion divine, and to enable us to receive him as our Savior.¹

The passages of the Bible which speak of the great exaltation of Jesus cannot be brought against us, as Unitarians, unless they distinctly imply his equality with the Father. This needs to be carefully noted. Trinitarians are apt to think that every text which speaks of Christ's great power and wisdom and authority, or of his exaltation at the right hand of God, militates against our doctrine; but it is not so. He is to us also the Son of the living God, the image of the Father through whom, both in his person and in his life and in his words, as much is made known of the Infinite God as it is possible for us to know in our present state. There is but one way to overthrow the Unitarian doctrine. It is to prove not that Christ is "a Prince and a Savior by the right hand of God highly exalted," but that he is the Infinite God himself, by whom that exaltation was given. It is not to prove that the Father made Himself manifest through the Son, as it is written, "the word was made flesh," that is, "the divine

¹ Editor's Note: Eliot follows with remarks on the preexistence of Christ as a Spirit being. In this respect he differs with the Socinian view of this journal.

wisdom and power were manifested in a human form,” but it is to prove that the Father, who is the being manifested, is the same as the Son, who was the medium of the manifestation. The question between us and Trinitarians is simply this: Did the Savior, when he said, “My Father is greater than I,” mean what he seemed to say, and what he was understood by those who heard him to say, or did he mean that, while there was an apparent inferiority, he was in fact equal with the Father, possessed of the same attributes, being himself the absolute and Supreme God?

Here is the true point of controversy. I think that it settles itself. I scarcely know how to bring any arguments to make it plainer. I am almost afraid that in multiplying words, in so plain a case, I may darken counsel, but must try. I shall show you, first, that Christ himself distinctly denies the possession of divine attributes; secondly, that the Apostles, when they speak of him in the highest terms of exaltation, and therefore of his highest nature, uniformly declare his entire dependence on God, the Father.

CHRIST DENIED POSSESSING DIVINE ATTRIBUTES

The leading attributes of Deity are Self-existence, Omnipotence, Omniscience, and Infinite Goodness. If we can prove by the words of Christ himself that he denies the possession of one and all of these, I think our case is made out. His distinct denial of any one of these attributes would be enough; but, in fact, he denies them all.

1. Of Self-existence. This attribute implies absolute independence, an existence to which no other being is necessary, self-derived and self-sustained. But Christ declares a hundred times that he came not of himself, but that the Father sent him; see John 8:42, “Neither came I of myself, but he sent me.” He declared that he was indebted to the Father for the support of his existence. “As the living Father has sent me, and I *live by* the Father” (John 6:57); and again, “As the Father has life in himself, *so has he given* to the Son to have life in himself . . . I can of my own self do nothing; as I hear I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will, but the will of the Father who sent me” (John 5:26-30). He says also, “No man takes my life from me, but I lay it down of myself; I have power [the literal meaning is *authority*] to lay it down, and I have authority to take it again; *this commandment have I received* of my Father” (John 10:18). This agrees with 2 Corinthians 13:4: “Though he was crucified through weakness, yet he lives by the power of God.” Here is a distinct and full denial of underived and independent existence. Upon the authority of Christ himself, therefore, we say that he was not the Self-existent God.

2. Omnipotence. Jesus distinctly and repeatedly declares that he is not in possession of this attribute. He uniformly speaks of his power as being given by the Father and exercised under His direction. But the idea of omnipotence is inconsistent with that of derived power and delegated authority. Omnipotence cannot be given by one to another. In such a case he who gives must be greater than he who receives. Therefore, when the Savior says, "All power is given to me by the Father" (Matt. 28:18), the word *given* necessarily limits the word *all*. The text is sometimes quoted to prove Christ's omnipotence, but we think it proves just the contrary. Again he says, "The Son can do nothing of himself" (John 5:19); and again, "I can of my own self do nothing" (5:30). And still more pointedly, when he was asked for a certain distinction by James and John, he answered, "To sit on my right hand and on my left is not mine to give; but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared of my Father" (Matt. 20:23). In his last conversation with his disciples he says, "If ye loved me, ye would rejoice, because I said, I go unto the Father; for my Father is greater than I" (John 14:28). These declarations are distinct and unqualified. We are therefore ready to receive Christ in the highest exaltation which the Scripture accords to him. But we feel at the same time compelled to believe his own words. These are the best authority. They do not teach us that he is Almighty, but that he is dependent in all things upon the Father.

3. Omniscience. This is the attribute by which he who possesses it knows all things. An omniscient being needs not to be instructed. Thus it is written of the Almighty, "Who has directed the spirit of the Lord, or, being his counsellor, has taught him? With whom took he counsel, and who instructed him, and taught him in the path of judgment, and taught him knowledge?" (Isa. 40:13, 14). Compare those words with the words of the Savior, "My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me" (John 7:16); and "The word which ye hear is not mine, but the Father's who sent me" (John 14:24). And again, "As my Father hath taught me, I speak these things" (John 8:28). And even more strongly, "I have not spoken of myself, but the Father who sent me, he gave me a commandment, what I should say and what I should speak . . . Whatsoever I speak, therefore, even as the Father said unto me, so I speak" (John 12:49, 50). All this is an expression of imparted knowledge, which, however great it may be, must always be less than omniscience. And accordingly we find that when asked concerning a future event, Jesus answered, "Of that day and that hour knoweth no man; no, not the angels in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father" (Mark 13:32; Matt. 24:36). In Matthew it says, "but my Father *only*." We cannot escape from these words

if we would. We place implicit reliance upon whatever Christ taught. We believe that God spoke through him; and upon his own authority we say that omniscience is the attribute of the Father only.

4. Infinite Goodness. We believe that Christ was perfectly free from sin, that he went about doing good, and finished the work which God gave him to do. In this sense, therefore, he was perfect; but there is a sense in which none but an Infinite being is good, and *in this sense* Christ denied it of himself. When someone called him "Good Master," he answered, "Why do you call me good? There is none good but one, that is God" (Mark 10:18). The same words are found in the parallel passages in Matthew and Luke.

What are we to say of these plain denials by the Savior himself, not of one only, but of all these attributes? We have his own words to prove that he is neither Self-existent, Omniscient, All-wise, nor Infinitely Good. On what ground can we set aside his testimony? We shall be told, perhaps, that all this is spoken only of his *human nature*; that he denied these attributes as a man, although he was conscious of possessing them as God.

This answer does not seem to us the fair interpretation of plain language. For, first, we find no passage in the Bible, and there is none, in which it is taught that our Savior had two natures, one human and one divine; but he is always spoken of as a single being, "the Christ, the Son of the living God." And secondly we think that when he spoke of himself without qualification, using the personal pronouns, *I*, and *myself*, and *me*, he must have used them in their common meaning, and he was certainly, at the time, so understood. If he had intended to have been understood differently, he would have given some indication of it. As he gave none, we take his words in their plain and obvious meaning. Just as you would understand me, if I were to say, "I do not know such a thing," or "I cannot do such a thing," without qualifying the words, so do we understand him. We dare not understand him otherwise. For would it be right for me to say, "I do not know such a thing," if I really know it? And defend myself by saying that my body does not know it, but my mind does? Or that I know it as a clergyman, but not as a citizen? Such would not be a fair use of language; and if the Scripture were to be interpreted in such a manner, there is absolutely no doctrine which could not be proved from it. We understand Jesus simply as he spoke, and therefore, while we pray for the time when "at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess him to be the Lord," we remember that this must always be done "to the glory of God the Father."

THE APOSTLES DECLARE CHRIST'S DEPENDENCE ON THE FATHER

The quotation of this verse brings us to the last topic of my present discourse. I am still to prove that the Apostles, in those passages where they speak of Christ's highest exaltation, uniformly declare that he is dependent for all upon the Father. For this purpose I shall use only those texts which are commonly considered proofs of his Supreme Divinity. They are therefore undoubtedly applicable to his highest nature, whatever they may be; and if, when so spoken of, his dependence on God is alleged, our argument will be conclusive. For, as I have already said, we do not pretend to define the degree of exaltation which belongs to Christ. We remain Unitarians so long as we believe that the Father alone is the Supreme God.

1. There is probably no text oftener quoted against us than the first part of the Epistle to the Hebrews, particularly the eighth verse: "But unto the Son he says, Your throne, O God, is for ever and ever; a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of your kingdom; you have loved righteousness and hated iniquity." The word God is here applied to Christ, and is understood as a proof of his deity. This, however, would be an uncertain proof, for the same word is applied quite frequently in a subordinate sense. It was applied to Moses, who was said to be "a god to Pharaoh" (Exod. 7:1). Those also were called Gods to whom the word of God came (see John 10:35). We must look, therefore, to the connection to see what its meaning is, in this case; and we read directly after the words quoted, "Therefore God, even thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows." Observe, therefore, which is the point of our argument in this case, that, even when spoken of as God, there is the Supreme God over him, from whom he receives his anointing, and by whom he is raised above his equals. Let me read to you, also, the beginning of that same chapter, that you may see how plainly the dependence of Christ upon the Father is expressed.

God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by his Son, whom he has appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high, being made so much better than the angels, as he has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than them. For to which of the angels said he at any time, You

are my Son, this day have I begotten thee? And again, I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a Son.

We admit that words cannot easily express higher exaltation than this. It was the Apostle's intention to speak in the strongest terms which were consistent with truth, and he has done so. In reading them we perceive that the exaltation of Christ is greater than we can fully comprehend. But at the same time we perceive, with equal plainness, delegated authority and absolute dependence on the Father. On the one hand, we can have no doubt that his highest nature is here spoken of, for there is no passage in which stronger words are used. On the other hand, we read that he did not speak of himself, but that God spoke by him; that in all his highest offices he was the agent of God, working only by God's power; that he obtained a more excellent name than the angels by inheritance, according to the appointment of God; that there was a time when his existence began, as plainly expressed in these words, "*This day* have I begotten thee." In the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth verses, which are a quotation from Psalm 102, the Almighty Himself is addressed as the source of all power and might;² after which the Apostle returns to his former subject, the dignity of Christ, which he again ascribes to God as the Author and Giver.

We refer next to the Epistle to the Colossians, the first and second chapters. I request you to read them carefully for yourselves. You will find the same remarks hold good which have been made on the passage already quoted. You will find language which you cannot reconcile with the doctrine of mere humanity; you will feel amazed, as in the presence of a being highly exalted above every one of us; but everywhere you will find proof of *derived* authority and *dependent* existence. He is "the image of the invisible God," and therefore not the invisible God Himself. He is "the first-born of every creature," and therefore himself a created being. The reason and the source of his great exaltation are distinctly given: "For it pleased the Father that in him all fulness should dwell."

In both of these passages language is used which seems to imply that Christ is the agent by whom all things were created and upheld. I think that this properly refers to the spiritual world in heaven and on earth, of which he is appointed the head and director; but time will not allow me to consider this question now. It is altogether unimportant to our present argument, for it does not affect the real exaltation of Christ, nor does it alter the fact of his complete dependence on the Father.

² Editor's note: There is no evidence for a change of address in verse 10. The Son is meant and the reference is to the new heavens and earth (see Heb. 1:6, NASV; 2:5).

We next refer to Philippians 2:5-11; in the sixth verse it is said of Jesus Christ, "Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God"; of which Calvin says, "The form of God here signifies majesty; I acknowledge, indeed, that Paul does not make mention of Christ's divine essence." To be in the form of God means to be the image or manifestation of God, which is also the interpretation adopted by Le Clerc and Macknight. The proper meaning of the words, "Thought it not robbery to be equal with God," is that given by Bishop Sherlock, namely, "He was not tenacious of appearing as God; did not eagerly insist to be equal with God." This is the meaning adopted by Coleridge, Professor Stuart, Luther, Melancthon, Archbishop Tillotson, Paley, and many others of the most eminent Trinitarian writers. But the exact meaning of the words is not important to our present argument. Whatever they mean, their limitation is found in the ninth and following verses. "*Therefore God hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, of those in heaven, and those in earth and those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is the Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*"

One of the most important books in the New Testament, from a doctrinal point of view, is the Acts of the Apostles. It contains their first preaching after they had been fully instructed in their work. Whatever they knew of Jesus or believed concerning him will undoubtedly be found there. They were impelled at the same time by strong affection for their master, by a deep sense of their former unfaithfulness to him, and by the direct command of God, to declare the whole truth. Now what is the substance of their preaching? Read the first ten chapters of that book and determine. I think that you will agree with me that it is a series of Unitarian discourses. There is not an expression, not a single word that I cannot use, or that I am not accustomed to use as a Unitarian believer. They indeed declare that Christ is a Prince and a Savior, that he is both Lord and Christ; but how is it that he obtained this authority? Let them answer in their own words: "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that *God hath made* that same Jesus whom ye have crucified both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36). "Then Peter and the other Apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree. *Him hath God exalted* with his own right hand, to be a Prince and a Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins" (Acts 5:29). This is the utmost of their preaching; further than this they never go; and thus far we as Unitarians go with them.

These Scriptures all speak of Christ in his highest nature. You hear them quoted every day to prove his absolute deity. Yet you perceive that all of them, by showing his dependence on God the Father, prove the exact contrary, and teach that though so highly exalted, even above our perfect comprehension, he is not the Supreme God nor equal to God the Father. In further explanation of this view I will quote the following passage from the First Epistle to the Corinthians, which is a distinct and full declaration of the Unitarian doctrine:

Then comes the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father, when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death. For he has put all things under his feet. But when he saith, All things are put under him, it is manifest that he is excepted who did put all things under him. And when all things shall be subdued to him, then shall the Son also himself be subject unto him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all (1 Cor. 15:24-28).

I cannot express my faith as a Unitarian in plainer words than these. They are a brief statement, in the most unequivocal terms, of the general, pervading doctrine of the Bible. Such is the testimony of Christ concerning himself and such the testimony of the Apostles concerning him as their Lord and Master. It is all consistent with the Savior's own prayer to the Father, "That they might know Thee, the only True God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent"; and with the words of Paul, "To us there is but one God, even the Father, and one Lord Jesus Christ."

There are, however, a few texts which, taken by themselves, are thought to teach a different doctrine. Among these the introduction to the Gospel of John is the most important. I wish to examine them fairly and carefully, and must therefore defer them to later. In the mean time, and in conclusion, let me again say that, with the plain words of Christ and his Apostles to guide us, we ought not to be troubled or shaken in our faith by a few comparatively obscure and difficult passages. In so large a subject we ought to expect some remaining difficulties, and we have reason to thank God that the general doctrine of the Bible is so plainly taught, that he who runs may read.

(to be continued in a subsequent issue of the Journal)