

they appeal can just as easily, if not more appropriately, be understood as vindicating unitarian doctrine.

I. THE APPEAL TO LOGIC

Unitarians are often depicted as insatiable skeptics who exalt human logic over divine revelation. We are told that we must accept “orthodox” doctrines “by faith.” In fact, our very salvation depends upon it. As Millard J. Erickson writes:

We do not hold the doctrine of the Trinity because it is self-evident or logically cogent. We hold it because God has revealed that this is what he is like. As someone has said of this doctrine: Try to explain it, and you’ll lose your mind; but try to deny it, and you’ll lose your soul.³

Thus, by a measure of slander, intimidation, and guilt by association,⁴ unitarianism is officially declared off-limits by some of the self-appointed watchdogs of “orthodoxy.”

Ironically, however, Erickson’s above-quoted statement appears to refute itself. If God has so clearly “revealed” His triune nature, then why is it “not overtly or explicitly stated in Scripture?”⁵ If human logic is to be discarded as unsatisfactory, why must we use it to construct this “faith doctrine”? Erickson writes:

In formulating our position on the Trinity, our theological method will be put to the test. Since the Trinity is not explicitly taught in Scripture, we will have to put together complimentary themes, draw inferences from biblical teachings, and decide on a particular type of conceptual vehicle to express our understanding. In addition, because the formulation of the doctrine has had a long and complex history, we will have to evaluate past constructions against the background of their period and culture, and to enunciate the doctrine in a way that will be similarly appropriate for our age.⁶

³ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1983, 342.

⁴ “Jehovah’s Witnesses deny the Trinity. If you deny it too, you’re as bad as a Jehovah’s Witness.” To this popular jibe one may wish to answer that Jehovah’s Witnesses also believe in the doctrine of Creation, but that does not make the doctrine wrong.

⁵ Erickson, 321.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 322.

Trinitarian Dogma from a Unitarian Perspective

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Unitarianism has always been unpopular in Christendom. “It must be remembered that the Church has always had to fight Unitarian conceptions of Christ,” writes one church historian.¹ This disdain is particularly true of the present, since the Bible-believing Unitarian Church of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has become the liberal Unitarian Universalist Church of the twentieth. In fact it is widely believed that to affirm a unitarian view of God is to deny the authority of Scripture, whereas to affirm a Trinitarian view of God is to accept it.² To many evangelicals, the terms “unitarian” and “Christian” are not even compatible.

The publishers of this journal are unitarians who believe in the inspiration of Scripture. The very term “biblical unitarian” is designed to distinguish us from liberals who deny the authority of the Bible. As biblical unitarians, we would like to challenge the sweeping claims of popular evangelical Trinitarians for whom proof-texting and appeals to church tradition appear to be the standard in theological debate. Once these claims are placed under the microscope of theological inquiry, it appears that Trinitarians may themselves be guilty of the charges which they level against unitarians. In addition, many of the Scriptures to which

* All Scripture references are NIV unless otherwise specified.

¹ Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Ages*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1954, 142.

² Cf. E. Calvin Beisner, *God in Three Persons*, Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1984, 25.

To construct this doctrine we must “put together complimentary themes,” “draw inferences,” and study its “long and complex history”? This hardly sounds like an exercise in shunning human logic and exercising childlike faith.⁷

Trinitarians very much depend upon logic both to build and to defend their dogma. Representative in this respect is the following excerpt from the indexes of a popular evangelical study Bible:

In the N.T. there is clear revelation that Father, Son, and Spirit are God; thus a Triunity or Trinity (neither is a biblical word). a. The Father is God (John 6:27; Eph. 4:6). b. Jesus Christ is God (Heb. 1:8). c. The Spirit is God (Acts 5:3-4). d. The three Persons are associated equally and as one (Matt. 28:19, “name”; 2 Cor. 13:14).⁸

Let us not mince words. This is strictly a logical argument, *viz.*:

Major premises: There is one God.
Minor premises: The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are equally God.
Conclusion: The one God is the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.

Without spending an inordinate amount of time on this point, we may note simply that the faulty point in this *logical* argument lies in the minor premises. Whereas the New Testament clearly designates the Father as *ho theos*, “the God,” over 1,350 times, it designates the Son as *theos*, “God,” less than a dozen times.⁹ Even Erickson admits that “Somewhat more problematic is the status of Jesus as deity.”¹⁰ Vincent Taylor writes:

We may accept Bultmann’s words as an understatement, “in describing Christ as ‘God’ the New Testament still exercises great restraint.”

The reasons for this restraint are not far to seek. It is due in large measure to the profound effect of the monotheism of the Old Testament upon the New Testament writers. I have said elsewhere of Paul’s Christology, “He will not compromise his belief that God

⁷ Cf. Mark M. Mattison, “The Complexity of Trinitarianism,” *A Journal from the Radical Reformation*, Summer 1993, Vol. 2, No. 4, 1, 2.

⁸ Charles C. Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1978, 1936.

⁹ John 20:28 is the one verse that does include the article, but the grammatical construction demands its presence: “*Apekrithe Thomas kai eipen auto, Ho kurios mou kai ho theos mou.*”

¹⁰ Erickson, 324.

is One God, not even for Christ’s sake,” and this is true also of the author of Hebrews and John.¹¹

We will return shortly to those few instances where Jesus is called “God.” Regarding the Holy Spirit, we may note briefly that though the Spirit is God, the Bible does not clearly teach that it is a separate Person. Unlike the Father and the Son, it has no name. Nor does it receive “equal time” on the pages of Scripture, which is strange if it is a separate, co-equal Person.¹²

Another popular Trinitarian argument hinges on the begetting of Jesus. “What God begets is God; just as what man begets is man,” writes C. S. Lewis.¹³ The argument runs like this:

The Jews believed that everything reproduced after its own kind, that is, brought forth offspring having the same nature of the parent (Gen. 1:21). For Peter to call Jesus “the Son of the living God,” therefore, almost certainly means that Peter thought of Jesus as having the same nature of God.¹⁴

Although this argument is nice and logical, the Bible never depicts Jesus’ Sonship in this way. In fact I find this argument to be particularly distasteful because it pushes human analogy much too far. Unlike the biological creatures of His own making (Gen. 1:24), God does not procreate. God did not “beget” Jesus in the same way that my father “begat” me. God “begat” Jesus by creating him through the power of the Spirit in the womb of the virgin (Luke 1:35).¹⁵ We may also remember that before God “begat” Jesus, He “begat” (albeit in a less special way) the kings of Israel (Psa. 2:7; II Sam. 7:14). As we will soon see, the New Testament conceives Jesus’ Sonship in Messianic terms, not in reproductive biological terms.

¹¹ Vincent Taylor, “Does the New Testament Call Jesus God?” *The Expository Times*, Vol. 73, 118.

¹² One may note its conspicuous absence in such places as the openings of Paul’s epistles (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:1, 3; Eph. 1:2, 3; Phil. 1:2; Col. 1:3; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1, 2; 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2; Tit. 1:4; Philem. 1:3).

¹³ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, New York: The MacMillan Company, 1943, 122.

¹⁴ Beisner, 14.

¹⁵ Cf. Anthony Buzzard, “Some Issues Relating to the Preexistence of Christ in the New Testament and the Current Debate,” *A Journal from the Radical Reformation*, Summer 1992, Vol. 1, No. 4, 22, 23.

Logical arguments such as these could be multiplied. As people who are diligently trying not to understand a doctrine for fear of losing their minds, evangelical Trinitarians seem to be doing a poor job. Time after time they invoke logical syllogisms and human analogies to explain and defend their doctrine, yet when their logic is criticized they complain of rationalism and object that human logic cannot be brought to bear on the topic. This inconsistency is very frustrating for biblical unitarians who find that the rules of the game keep changing.¹⁶ As William Ellery Channing wrote:

I doubt not that they who insist so continually on the duty of exalting Scripture above reason, consider themselves as particularly secured against the pride of reason. Yet none, I apprehend, are more open to the charge. Such persons are singularly prone to enforce their own interpretations of Scripture on others, and to see peril and crime in the adoption of different views from their own. Now, let me ask, by what power do these men interpret revelation? Is it not by their reason? Have they any faculties but the rational ones by which to compare Scripture with Scripture, to explain figurative language, to form conclusions as to the will of God? Do they not employ on God's word the same intellect as on his works? And are not their interpretations of both equally results of reason?¹⁷

Now that we have criticized the fickle Trinitarian view of logic, let us consider some of the sweeping claims of popular evangelical Trinitarians about New Testament Christology. Like their use of logic, some of their favorite proof-texts and passages prove to be two-edged swords.

II. THE TITLES OF JESUS

Of all Jesus' titles, none is so important as "Son of Man." As Jesus' favorite self-designation it is our most promising starting point for discerning his self-consciousness.¹⁸

¹⁶In all fairness, it must be admitted that not all evangelical Trinitarians hide their appreciation of the logical method. In their article "The Incarnation and Logic: Their Compatibility Defended" (*Trinity Journal*, 1985, Vol. 6, 185-197), for example, Norman Geisler and William Watkins undertake the unenviable task of trying to prove that Chalcedonian orthodoxy makes logical sense in the twentieth century.

¹⁷William Ellery Channing, "Christianity a Rational Religion," *The Works of William E. Channing, D.D.*, Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1875, reprinted 1903, 238.

¹⁸Robert G. Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings*, Philadelphia:

Henry C. Thiessen's interpretation of this title is typical of evangelicism:

Jesus' favorite name for himself was Son of Man. In all but one instance (Acts 7:56), it is he who uses this term of himself in the New Testament. The term does not always clearly denote deity, as in Matt. 8:20; 11:18f.; 17:12; and Luke 9:44, but it very often does. For instance, it is as Son of Man that he has authority on earth to forgive sins (Matt. 9:6), to interpret the Sabbath law (12:8), and to execute judgement (John 5:27). It is as Son of Man that he gives his life a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28), will send his angels to gather out the tares (Matt. 13:41), will sit upon the throne of his glory (Matt. 19:28; 25:31), and will come again (Matt. 24:44; 26:64). When Jesus declared he was the Son of Man spoken of in Daniel, who was to come in great power, the high priest accused him of blasphemy (Matt. 26:63f.; cf. Dan. 7:13).¹⁹

Thiessen clearly confuses Messiahship with Godship, a common mistake. "Trinitarians are trapped by the well-worn slogan that Jesus must be either a liar, a lunatic or the Supreme God," writes Buzzard. "They have not been able to conceptualize another category—that of the Messiah."²⁰ The promised Messiah of the Old Testament was not Almighty God Himself, but an exalted Davidic king (cf. 2 Sam. 7:12-16).²¹

The term "Son of Man" is derived from Daniel 7:13, in which "one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven" approaches the throne of God. Since "there was not present before the time of Jesus a well-defined Christology in Judaism which spoke of a messianic figure called the Son of man,"²² Jesus' titular usage of this term was obscure (cf. John

Westminster Press, 1973, 133. For the authenticity of the Son of Man sayings, cf. 137-147.

¹⁹Henry C. Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949, rev. 1979, 94.

²⁰Anthony F. Buzzard, "The Challenge Facing Trinitarianism Today," *A Journal from the Radical Reformation*, Fall 1993, Vol. 3, No. 1, 26.

²¹For example, in *The Messianic Idea in Israel* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1955), Joseph Klausner writes that Isaiah 11 "is the most exalted portrayal of the personal Messiah which we have in the books of the prophets. Isaiah's Messiah is actually *the supreme man*, politically and spiritually, physically and ethically, alike" (65).

²²Stein, 136. *The Similitudes of Enoch* and *IV Ezra* also draw upon the Danielic tradition, but the term "Son of Man" may not strictly function as a title in them (cf. Barnabas Lindars, *Jesus: Son of Man*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983, 9, 10). The dating of this literature also raises some

12:34). This seems consistent with Jesus' practice of concealing his Messianic identity (cf. Mark 8:29, 30) in order to avoid unnecessary political confrontation "before his hour." In addition, the Danielic "Son of Man" figure (the nation of Israel) inherits an eternal kingdom only after much tribulation (7:21, 22, 25-27); he is vindicated and glorified through suffering. This made the figure ideal for Jesus' use. As the true "Son of Man," Jesus had to suffer and die (Mark 8:31) before he could come "in his Father's glory with the holy angels" (v. 38).²³ It appears that the apocalyptic tradition of Daniel 7, then, was the determining factor in Jesus' Messianic self-identity.

As the Son of Man, God's chosen Messiah, Jesus has been given authority to judge (John 5:27) and to forgive sins (cf. Mark 2:10, a verse to which we will return shortly). Clearly Jesus was no ordinary man, but neither is he the Supreme God; rather, as the Anointed One, he is the Son of the living God.

This brings us to our next title: "Son of God." Here too we find considerable confusion in the Trinitarian camp. For example, Erickson writes:

We may note how Jesus responded both to those who accused him of claiming deity and to those who sincerely attributed divinity to him. At his trial, the accusation brought against him was that he claimed to be the Son of God (John 19:7; Matt. 26:63-65). If Jesus did not regard himself as God, here was a splendid opportunity for him to correct a mistaken impression. Yet this he did not do.²⁴

Without explanation Erickson indiscriminately uses the terms "God" and "Son of God" interchangeably. To this we must object. Far too often, evangelical Trinitarians seem to assume that which has yet to be proved. The meaning of divine Sonship is one of those axioms. What does the New Testament mean by the term "Son of God"? Is it simply another title for Almighty God? A careful review of the Scriptures seems to preclude this possibility. Buzzard writes:

The title "Son of God" is applied . . . in Scripture to angels (Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7; Gen. 6:2, 4; Psa. 29:1; 89:6; Dan. 3:25), to Adam (Luke

pertinent questions. *IV Ezra* was written at the end of the first century, and the dating of the *Similitudes* is problematic (cf. Stein, 134-136).

²³ Mark M. Mattison, *The Making of a Tradition*, Wyoming, Michigan: Ministry School Publications, 1991, 98.

²⁴ Erickson, 326.

3:38), to the nation of Israel (Ex. 4:22), to kings of Israel as representing God, and in the New Testament to Christians (John 1:12). We shall search in vain to find any application of this title to an uncreated being, a member of the eternal Godhead. This idea is simply absent from the biblical idea of divine sonship.²⁵

Though Sonship does not imply deity, it is still true that there is a difference between Jesus' Sonship and that of God's people generally. We are sons and daughters by adoption (Rom. 8:23), whereas Jesus is the "only-begotten" or "unique" (*monogenes*) Son of God. This is because, unlike other men who are born in sin, Jesus was conceived holy. The creation of the Son of God is spelled out in Luke 1:35, where Gabriel explains to Mary that "the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So [*dio kai*] the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." Commenting on this verse, Raymond Brown writes:

Of the nine times *dio kai* occurs in the NT, three are in Luke/Acts. It involves a certain causality; and Lyonnet, "L'Annonciation," 61, [chapter from *Maria in Sacra Scriptura*, Vol. IV, 1967] points out that this has embarrassed many orthodox theologians, since in pre-existence christology a conception by the Holy Spirit in Mary's womb does not bring about the existence of God's Son. Luke is seemingly unaware of such a christology; conception is causally related to divine sonship for him.²⁶

We may note also that even here, Sonship is presented in essentially Messianic terms. In Luke 1:31-33, Jesus is depicted as fulfilling the Davidic covenant:

You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.

As the Son of God, Jesus is God's chosen representative in much the same way that the judges and kings of Israel were God's representatives

²⁵ Anthony F. Buzzard, *Who Is Jesus? A Plea for a Return to Belief in Jesus, The Messiah*, Oregon, Illinois: The Restitution Herald, n.d., 10.

²⁶ Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1977, 291.

(a point to which we will shortly return). As the divinely conceived Son, however, he represents God in a much more perfect way. That “Son of God” means “Messiah” or “Christ” (Anointed One) is apparent from John 20:31, where the Evangelist explains that his Gospel was “written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.”

The term “Lord” is another crucial title. As “a more general type of argument for the deity of Christ,”²⁷ evangelical Trinitarians frequently argue that the Greek term *kurios* as used in the New Testament is equivalent to the Old Testament *Yahweh* and *adonai*, which are frequently rendered *kurios* in the LXX.²⁸ Of course this is a “general” argument because they recognize that *kurios* is used of people other than God Almighty.²⁹

Trinitarians continue to confuse “the LORD God” with “the Lord Messiah.” This is nowhere more apparent than in the interpretation of Psalm 110:1, which states that “the LORD [*Yahweh*] says to my Lord [*adoni*], ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’” Commentators frequently assert that *Yahweh* here addresses *adonai*, a term reserved exclusively for God Himself. Since the second Lord of this passage is clearly Jesus Christ,³⁰ then Jesus is *adonai*, God. However, the second Lord of Psalm 110:1 is addressed rather as *adoni*, “my Lord,” a term which is used of Moses,³¹ Eli (1 Sam. 1:26), and a host of other Old Testament personages. “The clear difference between *adonai* and *adoni* has not prevented commentators, even the most sophisticated, from unconsciously blurring the distinction between God and the Messiah. They seem not to have realized that ‘my Lord’ is not a designation of Deity.”³²

²⁷ Erickson, 690.

²⁸ Cf. Erickson, 691; Thiessen, 95; Beisner, 31. Of course it is true that Old Testament references to God are sometimes applied in the New Testament to Christ. For example, Joel 2:32 (“And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved,” NIV) is applied to Christ in Romans 10:9, 13. This is perfectly intelligible from a biblical unitarian perspective, however. If God’s Messiah is truly His perfect representative to mankind, a faithful intermediary who fully reveals the character of God and acts on His behalf, then certainly what may be said about God may frequently be said of His Messiah. This point will be developed further in the next section.

²⁹ Cf. Thiessen, 95.

³⁰ Cf. Matt. 22:44; 26:64; Mark 12:36; 14:62; Luke 20:42, 43; 22:69; Acts 2:34, 35; Heb. 1:13; 10:13; 12:2.

³¹ Ex. 32:22; Num. 11:28; 12:11; 32:25, 27; 36:2.

³² Anthony F. Buzzard, “The Appealing Christology of King David,” *A Journal from the Radical Reformation*, Winter 1992, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2.

Although he does not recognize the difference between *adonai* (a title reserved for God alone) and *adoni* (a title used of men and angels), E. L. Allen understands the distinction between the two Lords in Psalm 110:1. He writes that Psalm 110 is:

so often cited in the New Testament that we must suppose it to have some basic significance for the Christology of the Early Church. The English and Greek translations of the opening verse obscure the distinction between two types of lordship that is intended in the original. The king—assuming that a king is here addressed—receives not the lordship of God himself but that of a delegate of his. The title *adonai* [*sic*] is one that may be used alike of God and man, yet the action of sitting at God’s right hand removes him from other men and associates him with God. That he sits does not imply that he remains inactive, a spectator of the divine victory. His acts are God’s acts because he is God’s representative. This is precisely the role ascribed in the New Testament to the Risen Lord “who is on the right hand of God, having gone into heaven; angels and authorities and powers being made subject to him” (1 Pet. 3:22).³³

The New Testament’s witness to the Lordship of Christ is based largely on Psalm 110. The Messiah is both God’s king and priest, His divinely appointed representative to whom He entrusts His full authority. Jesus is not “the LORD God” but “the Lord Messiah,” as the angel of the Lord explained in Luke 2:11: “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”

As this brief survey demonstrates, the various New Testament titles for Christ bear witness not to his deity but to his Messiahship. This is nowhere seen more clearly than in Jesus’ trial, where several of these titles are used interchangeably. Jesus is “the Christ” (Luke 22:67; 23:2), “the Son of Man” (22:69), “the Son of God” (22:70), and “a king” (23:2, 3). Jesus was not asked if he was God, and he did not say that he was. He claimed rather to be God’s Messiah.

III. THE CLAIMS OF JESUS

One of Jesus’ claims, as recorded primarily in John’s Gospel, is *egō eimi*, “I am.” “If you do not believe that I am,” Jesus said, “you will die

³³ E. L. Allen, “Representative-Christology in the New Testament,” *Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 46, 163-164.

in your sins” (John 8:24). “Before Abraham was born,” he said in the same discourse, “I am!” (8:58). By linking these and related claims to Exodus 3:14, evangelicals frequently argue that Jesus was invoking the divine name.³⁴ Is the Good News Bible correct in its translation of John 8:24, 28? Was Jesus repeating God’s statement from the burning bush, “I am who I am”? Or was this yet another claim to Messiahship?

In “Jesus of Nazareth: Messiah and Son of God,”³⁵ Sidney A. Hatch argues that there is no connection between Exodus 3:14 and Jesus’ claim. “The two expressions are not identical and differ in several respects,” he writes.³⁶ Never did Jesus say *egō eimi ho ōn*, “I am the existing one,” as the LXX (incorrectly) renders Exodus 3:14. On the other hand, there is an abundance of compelling evidence that the term *egō eimi* was a well-known claim to Messiahship.

As Edwin D. Freed points out,³⁷ the term first occurs in John’s Gospel in 1:20, where John the Baptist denies that he is the Christ: *egō ouk eimi ho christos* (“I am not the Christ”). It appears again in 4:26 where, in response to the Samaritan woman’s statement that “I know that Messiah (called Christ) is coming” (4:25), Jesus responded, *egō eimi, ho lalon soi* (“I am, the one speaking to you”). Freed considers 4:26 “the clue for understanding all other passages where the words occur.”³⁸ *Egō eimi* is in fact used in the Synoptic Gospels as a Messianic title.³⁹ Hatch concludes that “the phrase, ‘I am,’ when found on the lips of the Savior, means ‘I am the Messiah,’ not ‘I am God.’ The scriptural evidence is against the latter interpretation.”⁴⁰

Commenting on John 8:24, Freed writes:

The Messiah was expected to reprove sinners. “And he shall reprove sinners for the thoughts of their hearts” (Pss. Sol. xvii. 25 . . .). When Jesus thrice stated that the Jews would die in their sins unless they believed that *egō eimi*, he was doing only what the Messiah was expected to do—reprove sinners.⁴¹

³⁴ Cf. Erickson, 686.

³⁵ *A Journal from the Radical Reformation*, Fall 1992, Vol. 2, No. 1, 37-48.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 40, 41.

³⁷ Edwin D. Freed, “*Egō Eimi* in John viii. 24 in the Light of its Context and Jewish Messianic Belief,” *Journal of Theological Studies*, 1982, Vol. 33, 163.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Mark 13:6 (cp. Matt. 24:5); 14:61, 62; Luke 22:70.

⁴⁰ Hatch, 41, 42.

⁴¹ Freed, 164.

Quoting from *IV Ezra* and the Dead Sea Scrolls, Freed goes on to compare the Messiah’s expected role in judgement with John 7 and 8. He concludes that in these two chapters “John reveals his knowledge of various aspects of Jewish Messianic belief, including several OT texts.”⁴² This conclusion stands in sharp contrast with the widespread belief that such exalted functions as judgement can be executed by none other than Almighty God. The following statement well illustrates the plight of those who argue for the absolute deity of Christ on this supposition:

We should note that Jesus did not make an explicit and overt claim to deity. He did not say in so many words, “I am God.” What we do find, however, are claims which would be inappropriate if made by someone who is less than God.⁴³

This assumption betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the meaning and significance of the Messianic office. As we have already seen, the Messiah of Old Testament prophecy was to be entrusted with God’s authority and legally authorized to act on His behalf. This is precisely what we find expressed in the Gospel records, and this is precisely what evangelicals frequently overlook when they side with the unbelieving Jews in misinterpreting Jesus’ claims.

Jesus’ claim to forgive sins, vividly portrayed in Mark 2:1-12, is a case in point. When Jesus forgave the paralytic’s sin, the teachers of the law thought, “Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” Evangelicals frequently stop there, agreeing that God alone may forgive sin. Therefore, Jesus is God.⁴⁴ However, that is not the point of the passage. When Jesus went on to heal the paralytic, it was not to prove that they were correct, that only God could forgive sin and that he was in fact God, but rather to prove that, contrary to their belief, he did have the authority to forgive sin. It was “that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” (v. 10). The passage actually proves the exact opposite of what is so frequently claimed. Writing of this event, Allen points out that:

It is the action of one who is in the world as God’s fully accredited representative. . . . He is accused of invading the divine prerogative.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 167.

⁴³ Erickson, 684.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 684, 685; cf. also Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, Campus Crusade for Christ, 1973, reprinted 1977, 100.

He meets the criticism with the claim that this prerogative has in fact been entrusted to him. As God's delegate he acts "on earth" with power to forgive. . . . It is only because he is one in mind and will with God that Jesus can thus wield his authority among men. It is the same relation to God that enables him to set aside custom on such matters as fasting and the law itself on the sabbath. There is no claim here to divinity in a metaphysical sense, but the simple acknowledgement of his status and mission as God's vicegerent during his ministry.⁴⁵

We find the same principles at work in John 10:30-36, a crucial passage in this discussion. In verse 30, Jesus said that "I and the Father are one." It is widely recognized that the term for "one" is neuter (*hen*), not masculine (*heis*). Therefore, Jesus did not mean that he and the Father were one person. Trinitarians go on, however, to assert that the oneness indicates a oneness in substance, nature, or essence.⁴⁶ The context of John's Gospel, however, seems to preclude that interpretation, partly because Jesus desired that same oneness for his followers (17:11, 22). Clearly the oneness of 10:30 is unity of purpose, not a metaphysical description of one of Jesus' "natures."

At any rate, the response of Jesus' enemies was to accuse him of "blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God" (v. 33). Trinitarian apologists frequently stop at verse 33 and assert that the Jews were correct in their interpretation.⁴⁷ The passage goes on, however, and we see that Jesus defined his ministry rather in terms of Sonship and divine representation:

The word "god," it is said, is used in Scripture of some whose appointment or commission was from God—his word "came" to them. Surely, then, the term "Son of God" may be used legitimately, for one who is God's deputy in a higher and deeper sense, since his relation to God is that of Son to Father? (10.33-36). . . . What is clear is that in this passage the divine status of Jesus is his *qua* representative of God.⁴⁸

In 10:34-36, Jesus himself tells us how he may be understood to be "God"—not in the sense that he is an eternal, uncreated person sharing a

⁴⁵ Allen, 165, 166.

⁴⁶ Cf. Thiessen, 96; McDowell, 95.

⁴⁷ McDowell, for example, treats only John 10:30-33, *ibid.*

⁴⁸ Allen, 167.

divine nature with the Father—but in the same sense (albeit in a far more comprehensive way) as the judges and rulers of Israel (Psa. 82:6). We should remember that before Psalm 45:6 was applied to Jesus (Heb. 1:8), it was addressed to an Israelite king on his wedding day.

This is a key point, for it explains those very few passages (such as John 20:28) which apply the term "God" to the one who is in reality God's Messiah. Jacob Jervell writes:

It is a misunderstanding to believe that the gospel of John makes Jesus into God, or identical with God. The gospel permits the Jews to bring the accusation of blasphemy against Jesus, that is, that he equates himself with God (5:18). This criticism is pushed aside in the gospel. Jesus is not God but God's representative, and, as such, so completely and totally acts on God's behalf that he stands in God's stead before the world.⁴⁹

This is entirely consistent with the Jewish halakhic principle that "an agent is like the one who sent him,"⁵⁰ and it explains how the same man could say both "I and the Father are one" and "The Father is greater than I":

It should be added that the idea of the Son-Father relationship also implies that the Son is subordinate to the Father. This subordination fits very well the principles of agency, since here the thoughts of unity and identity between agent and sender are modified by an emphasis on the superiority of the sender.⁵¹

Allen writes:

God is greater than his representative, and the confession that Jesus is Lord must be rendered "to the glory of God the Father." The position is a paradoxical one, since Jesus in one sense is as God while in another he is below him. But the difficulty is resolved once we remember that the delegate is as his master yet is other than his master. The Lord Jesus only receives this singular honor because God has conferred it upon him, and it is rendered to him as his vicegerent.⁵²

⁴⁹ Jacob Jervell, *Jesus in the Gospel of John*, Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984, 21.

⁵⁰ Cf. Peder Borgen, "God's Agent in the Fourth Gospel," *Religions in Antiquity*, Leiden, Brill, 1968, 137-148.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁵² Allen, 166.

Similarly, G. H. Boobyer writes:

If, therefore, on occasion they [the New Testament writers] went so far as to refer to Jesus as “God,” this was meant as an expression of his soteriological significance—his God-given place in the unfolding of God’s plan of eschatological salvation. In so speaking, they were not assigning Jesus equality of status with God, and certainly did not intend to say that ontologically he was truly God. They meant that he was God functionally.⁵³

These statements are in complete harmony with the biblical unitarian position that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah of Old Testament expectation, God’s perfect representative to mankind. If Jesus may be considered “God” in some sense, he himself explains that it is in the same sense as God’s Old Covenant messengers. And if they were in some secondary sense “Gods,” then how much more could this be said of the one “whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world” (John 10:36, NASV; very possibly a reference to his own virginal conception)? As the full incarnation of God’s character, the Word or self-expressive activity of God become flesh, Jesus was born the Son of God and resurrected by God as the Lord of all. This is hardly a skeptical, rationalist interpretation of the Bible.

IV. CONCLUSION

Upon closer examination, the sweeping claims of popular evangelical apologists of Trinitarian dogma seem so unfounded that they could only have been formulated in the quietude of an ivory tower, far from the front line of vigorous theological debate with Bible-believing unitarians. To invoke Matthew 3:16, 17 (for example) as evidence of Trinitarian doctrine⁵⁴ is to debate with an imaginary critic. Of course we believe in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore, to be so dogmatic about a doctrine constructed with the building blocks of human logic, and then to complain when one’s logic is criticized, is to deal unfairly with one’s critics. Dogmatic insistence on adhering to Trinitarian doctrine when the Trinity “is not explicitly taught

⁵³ G.H. Boobyer, “Jesus as ‘Theos’ in the New Testament,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, Vol. 50, 260.

⁵⁴ Cf. e.g. Thiessen, 92.

in Scripture”⁵⁵ and when Jesus “did not make an explicit and overt claim to deity”⁵⁶ is entirely unfair.

It is also unfair that to this day, Trinitarians continue to charge unitarians with “psilanthropism,” considering Jesus to be “a mere man.” If Jesus “is not God,” writes Thiessen, “he is a deceiver or is self-deceived, and, in either case, if he is not God he is not good (*Christus, si non Deus, non bonus*).”⁵⁷ With this “all-or-nothing” perspective, either Jesus is Almighty God or he is “an average Joe.” By not seriously considering a third possibility, that Jesus is the Messiah, an exalted man who fully represents God, evangelical Trinitarians continue to make large exegetical blunders, confusing Messiahship or Sonship with Godship. Our desire is that they will stop striking at straw men and begin listening to our arguments.

⁵⁵ Erickson, 322.

⁵⁶ Erickson, 684.

⁵⁷ Thiessen, 96.