

# Unitarianism Defined\*

## Lecture Four: Inferiority and Subordination of Christ Continued

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In continuing the argument for the Inferiority and Subordination of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, I shall not overlook the fact that, to the force of all the language of the New Testament on which I have already commented, as distinctly teaching that fact, it is objected that, nevertheless, he is called, nay, calls himself, God, in the same sacred writings. But in passing, let me remind you that could Christ be proved to be truly God, the Trinity at any rate is not thereby proved, however many write, and speak, and preach, as though it were. The most in that case which could be made to follow would be a *Duality* in the Godhead. Still, admitting that Christ is called, or calls himself, God in the New Testament, the question arises, in what sense? Is it really in the sense of the Supreme, or of his Messenger and Representative?

The first proof, and one perhaps among those most frequently cited from the New Testament Scriptures, of the proper and Supreme Deity of our Savior, is his own declaration: "I and my Father are one" (John 10:30). But how did he explain this declaration himself? Did he permit such an interpretation of his words by those whom he addressed as is alleged? On the utterance of these words the Jews, who, I grant, seem to have understood him as meaning in the most literal sense that he was God, prepared at once to stone him as a blasphemer; and no wonder. But did

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our Lord admit the charge? Mark the words with which he checked their mistaken purpose: "Is it not written in your law" (a common way among the Jews of designating their Scripture), "I said, ye are Gods'? If he called them Gods, unto whom the word of God came," (i.e. who were the authorized, specially commissioned, inspired messengers of God's will, e.g. Moses, the Judges, Angels, etc., as we have before seen) — "and the Scripture cannot be broken; say ye of him, whom the Father hath sanctified, and sent into the world, Thou blasphemest! because I said" — what? that I am God, your Jehovah? By no means; but "because I said I am the Son of God? If I do not the works of my Father, believe me not. But if I do, though ye believe not me, believe the works; that ye may know, and believe, that the Father is in me, and I in him" (John 10:30-38).

All, then, that he admitted was that he had declared himself to be "the Son of God"; this being, as he must have meant, equivalent to his first declaration: "I and my Father are one." The oneness with the Father which he claimed to possess was not, then, a oneness of essence, but a oneness of purpose, consent, will, affection; such a oneness as might be supposed to exist between an affectionate and good parent and a dutiful, loving, devoted child; such a oneness, indeed, as in his remarkable prayer before the crucifixion, attesting again its subsistence between his Father and himself, he prays may also subsist among his chosen disciples, nay, among "them who should believe on him though their word" or preaching; "that they all," he says, "may be one; as Thou, Father, art in me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in us" (John 17). St. Paul spoke of Apollos and himself as one, in the same sense (1 Cor. 3:6, 8); such phraseology is very common in Scripture.

But the advocates of the doctrine of the proper Deity of our Lord often insist that the title "Son of God" proves it. The title "*Son of God*" is given to Christ some fifty times, and "*the Son*" some forty times in the New Testament. How strange that either should be thought to prove so stupendous a doctrine as that he is the Supreme God! The term *Son*, certainly in every other case that can be named, implies distinction from, subordination to, another, a Parent; why not here? Is it urged that, at any rate, it shows his Divine nature? In general terms that may be granted; but not that he is the same person or being — not surely the Supreme God. Angels, Israelites, Solomon, Christians repeatedly are all called sons of God in the Old and New Testaments.<sup>1</sup> Applied to Christ, it is an eminently

<sup>1</sup> Job 1:6; 38:7; Hosea 1:10; 2 Sam. 7:14; Rom. 8:14; 1 John 3:1; Gal. 4:4-7; John 3:12.

glorious title, expressive of God's special love, approval, etc., and of his own intimate connection with God — yet not less of his personal dependence and consequent subordination and inferiority. Sixty-six times God is expressly called *his* Father; repeatedly, *his* God; interchangeably and equally, "*his* God and our God, *his* Father and our Father." Even after his Resurrection, he said to Mary: "Go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father and your Father; and to my God and your God" (John 20:17). What must she, what must they have understood by such a plain and distinct declaration? What reason did he ever afterwards, did he ever before give them for interpreting it otherwise than according to its simple, obvious meaning?

Again: we are referred to the words of Thomas, after the Resurrection, who, on being convinced of that stupendous fact by our Lord's offering him the very evidence he demanded, exclaimed: "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). But if Thomas did thus really acknowledge his Master to be God, I should still insist that it was only in the sense of one "to whom the word of God came." Thomas, as a devout Jew, well knew that "no man hath seen God at any time"; his Master he had seen frequently, times without number. Our Lord had said to the woman of Samaria, "God is a Spirit"; and in perfect correspondence with that declaration, when he perceived the fright into which his disciples were thrown at his first appearance among them when "gathered together," he said: "A spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have" (Luke 24:39). Surely it is nothing but absurd to suppose that Thomas believed the being before him, who gave to him sensible demonstration that he had "flesh and bones," was the *Invisible* God, as the sacred writers so often style the Almighty.<sup>2</sup> Under the circumstances, the words seem to me only a perfectly natural expression of sudden and intense surprise and astonishment — the language of strong emotion on the part of Thomas. Of what was the disciple incredulous? Simply of the fact of his Lord's being alive again, the fact of his Resurrection. At what was he surprised? That there was given him the identical evidence without which he had declared he would not believe that the others had "seen the Lord" — that he was alive again — that he had come forth from the dead. "A spirit" — an apparition — a phantasm that "had not flesh and bones" — they might have seen; but not Jesus, their beloved Master; not him, again in the flesh. That was the point to be proved, and nothing else, nothing more. Nothing as to his

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<sup>2</sup> Col. 1:15; 1 Tim. 1:17; Heb. 11:27.

nature, rank in creation, or indeed what or who he was. But simply and only the actuality of the Lord's Resurrection, his personal identity with the crucified and buried Christ. What wonder at the astonishment or even awe which filled Thomas, when the proof he needed and asked was vouchsafed, and he felt that his revered, beloved, divine Master stood before him! What wonder that he, an Oriental — “according to the invariable habit of the Jews, Arabs, and almost all other Asiatic nations, who, when struck with wonder, often make exclamations in the name of the Deity”<sup>3</sup> — thus surprised and struck with this marvelous, this astounding fact, should have exclaimed in the fulness of his emotion, “My Lord and my God!” The language of mere confession — when he would have said, “*Thou art my Lord; thou art my God*” — was too cold for the state of mind in which Thomas was. Our Lord understood that state of mind in his incredulous follower, and his response to the exclamation shows it: “Because thou hast *seen*” — because thou hast seen that it is a being having flesh and bones — “thou hast believed” that it is really I, risen from the dead, and not a mere apparition; “blessed are they that have not seen and yet believed!”

There is a very acute remark of Prof. Norton, well worthy of attention in this connection:

Supposing that Thomas *had* believed, and asserted that his Master was God Himself; in what way should this affect our faith? We should still know the fact on which his belief was founded, the fact of the Resurrection of his Master, and could draw our own inferences from it, and judge whether his were well-founded. Considering into how great an error he had fallen in his previous obstinate incredulity, there would be but little reason for relying upon his opinion as infallible in the case supposed. I make this remark, not from any doubt about the meaning of his words, but, as I have said, for the purpose of pointing out one example of that incomplete and unsatisfactory mode of reasoning which appears in the use of many quotations from the Old and New Testaments.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ram Mohun Roy's *Final Appeal*, 232.

<sup>4</sup> Norton's *Statement of Reasons*, 2nd ed., 302, 303.

Well may we say, with the Roman Catholic Salmeron, that “Christ did not receive testimony *from the Evangelists*, that he was God.”<sup>5</sup> The Gospels, of which they were the writers, give no such testimony. In making this assertion, we have more than Roman Catholic admissions, however, to sustain us. Protestant Trinitarian divines have repeatedly made the same. Many, with Dr. Longley, Bishop of Ripon, have been forced to account in the best way they could for the obvious and remarkable silence or reserve of the Evangelists on so fundamental a point of Christian faith as they affirm this to be; and like him have held that before the descent of the Holy Ghost at Pentecost, they were designedly kept in ignorance of it by our Lord himself, as not being till then “able to bear” so startling a disclosure.<sup>6</sup>

To such shifts are the advocates of the Supreme Deity of Christ driven by the difficulty of reconciling it with the whole tenor and drift of the Gospel histories. But what if it were so? What if they did not know that their Master was God till they had shared the special illumination of Pentecost, or that which immediately followed? They assuredly, according to all critical authority, did not write their Gospels till long after this. The earliest date assigned to either of the Greek Gospels is A.D. 60. Is the marvel of the absence of the least hint or trace of any such doctrine, or of their singular reserve upon it, throughout the four, materially lessened by the supposition referred to? *They* knew it all the while. To them it must have been, whenever communicated, most amazing, that he with whom they represent themselves to have *made so free* — conversing unembarrassed with him, catechizing him, contradicting him, rebuking him, and finally deserting and denying him when arrested, put through a mock trial, condemned, and crucified, was, nevertheless, their GOD! Yes, all the while they were writing their memoirs of him, they knew this, and yet, without one word of comment, record his words: “I can of mine own self do nothing” — “My Father is greater than I” — “I came not to do mine own will, but the will of Him that sent me”! On far less important points they thought it worthwhile to throw in a word of explanation;<sup>7</sup> but on this, not one. Is it credible that with their minds possessed of this grand, yet overwhelming idea of their Master, nay, knowing verily, beyond question, by direct revelation, that he was God, they could thus calmly, with

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<sup>5</sup> *Comm. in Evang.* tom. i, 394.

<sup>6</sup> See the Bishop’s “*Brother’s Controversy*,” 54ff.

<sup>7</sup> E.g. John 12:33; 21:19.

no emotions of awe which we can discover, write out their several accounts of him in such a way that, had these Gospels perished, and no other books been written by his followers, the world would have been in the dark to this hour on this momentous subject?

Nay, more; take the case of John the Beloved, the last of the Evangelists, who wrote his Gospel in his old age. Is it credible that he, near the close of that Gospel, knowing at that moment, as is generally understood, all that the other three Gospels contained or omitted, and having brought his own narrative down to the Resurrection of his Master — knowing at the same time that that Master was God, very and Supreme God — should nevertheless have thus summed up, and declared the great and special purpose of his work? “These are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is” — what, or who, I ask? God? No — nothing like it. A clear, broad line of separation is preserved, perfectly corresponding to all that he and the other Evangelists had before recorded, perfectly in accordance with the whole tenor and drift of the entire New Testament. “These are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the *Christ, the Son of GOD*; and that, believing, ye might have Life through his name.” Even Dr. J. Pye Smith says: “It is plain that the immediate object, in the writings of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, was to produce a conviction that Jesus of Nazareth was *the Messiah* announced and described in the prophetic writings.”<sup>8</sup> Yes, and the same was John’s, as the passage just quoted from his Gospel shows. He had written all he had written there; all, including every text and passage ever since cited to prove either a Trinity of Persons in the Godhead or the Godhead of Christ — he had written it all to convince his readers, to make them “believe” just this one great, fundamental truth, namely “that Jesus is the Christ,” i.e. the Messiah, the two terms meaning precisely the same; the latter from the Hebrew, the former from the Greek: that he is “the *Son of God*” and not God Himself. Nay, more; to show that this was the essential thing to be believed, he adds: “And that believing, ye might have Life through his name” (John 20:31). “Life” here includes all, in the highest sense, which our Lord promises to his faithful followers; and all the knowledge of his Master necessary to secure to us that, John has unfolded in his precious pages. It is, I repeat, “that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.”

But there is an equal silence and reserve in the Acts of the Apostles, which book tells us of the wonderful doings at Pentecost; and in the

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<sup>8</sup> *Scrip. Test. to the Messiah*, vol. 2, 412.

several epistles and the Revelation. The dates assigned to all these books are long after Pentecost, although some of the Pauline epistles are earlier by a few years than the Gospels; and still not a trace of the Godhead of Christ is in any of them. I do not say that they furnish those who differ from us no *alleged* proofs of the doctrine, for these alleged proofs are what we are now to sift. To them let us proceed.

In Acts 20:28 we read of “the church of God which he hath purchased by his own blood.” I might remark upon the strangeness of such language, having no parallel to it throughout the Scriptures, and at first sight, and even the more we reflect on and analyze it, shocking to every unsophisticated mind. The “blood” of God! But we need not spend much time about it, for Griesbach, after most careful examination of manuscripts, Wetstein, Le Clerc, and Grotius all read “church of the Lord.” Adam Clark, in his notes on the passage, though admitting this reading to have “the greater evidence,” thinks it necessary to add, “We must maintain that, had not this Lord been God, his blood could have been no purchase for the souls of a lost world”; so, according to him, it might as well read, after all, as in our English version. But Kuinoel, Bishop Middleton, Dr. J.P. Smith, Bishop Marsh, and Olshausen (whose great commentary has been recently translated by Dr. Kenrick, of Rochester University) are explicit in favor of Griesbach’s reading; “which,” says Olshausen, “*all recent critics recognize as the right one.*”<sup>9</sup> Prof. Stuart and Dr. Barnes of Philadelphia are of the same mind; and nothing more need be said of a text which is thus relieved of all difficulty, and furnishes not a shadow of support to the doctrine I am controverting.

In the epistle to the Romans, we read: “Christ . . . who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen” (9:5). But look at the passage. He is recounting the distinctive and glorious privileges of the Jews; and, in the third verse, so profound is his interest and anxiety for their salvation that he almost wishes himself “accursed,” or, as the margin reads, “separated from” Christ, for their sake. What is his object? To vindicate the call of the Gentiles into, and the rejection of the Jews as such, from the Christian church. Throughout the epistle he seeks to meet and neutralize Jewish prejudices, and the opposition of his “brethren,” his “kinsmen according to the flesh,” to the new faith. Would he have been so infatuated as the Trinitarian construction of this text would make him? When he knew how tenaciously, not to say bigotedly, the nation clung to the Unity of God,

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<sup>9</sup> Kenrick’s Olshausen, vol. 3, 384.

would he, having in mind the obvious purpose stated above, have riveted at the start all their prejudices, and confirmed all their opposition, by asserting that that Jesus whom they had crucified as a malefactor was nevertheless that God Himself? Besides, how abruptly, without cause or connection, is such a tremendous statement as is supposed here introduced! No use appears for it, or is made of it by St. Paul. Nowhere else does he, or any of the sacred writers, call Christ “God over all, blessed forever.” Directly the contrary, as we have already seen, and shall see again. Remember, moreover, that the punctuation of the text is a modern and purely arbitrary matter. Every scholar knows that it must depend on what the reader understands this or indeed any passage to mean; for the apostolic autographs were probably without any punctuation, as are the most ancient manuscripts. Accordingly, we find critics and versions differ, and often widely, in their pointing of this and of other texts. Lachmann, Tischendorf, Rückert, and a host of the ablest critics put a period after the word *flesh*, and read: “Of whom Christ came, according to the flesh. He, who is above all God, be blessed forever!” or “God, who is above all, be blessed forever!” Erasmus, without positively adopting it, declares that this punctuation “is perfectly suitable to the purport of the discourse.” It is also remarkable that, though the ancient Greek manuscripts are in general without punctuation marks, the celebrated *Codex Ephraemi*, one of the most authoritative among them, has actually, as above, a period after the word “flesh.” With this construction, the clause under consideration becomes a Doxology, or ascription of praise to God for the coming of His Christ or Messiah, in the prophetic line of “the covenants . . . the promises . . . the fathers”; His preeminent gift. As such, it must be presumed, according to the uniform style and custom of St. Paul,<sup>10</sup> to have been addressed to the Father as “God above all,” and not to Christ.

Besides, the apostle had just before (v. 3) spoken of himself in reference to his human lineage in the exact phrase in which he now speaks of Christ — “according to the flesh” — referring to his own earthly descent. Would he immediately, on the instant, have declared him, nevertheless, with no explanation, with no connecting clause, and for no conceivable purpose, to be the self-existing, Supreme God? Would this, I again ask, have been in the least likely to conciliate the Jews? No, no. Depend upon it: Paul was too sagacious, too acute, too logical, at the

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<sup>10</sup> See Rom. 1:25; 2 Cor. 1:3; 11:31; Eph. 1:3.



outset of his argument to proclaim, even if in the sequel he meant to prove, that the Crucified was their GOD.

And the history of the church sustains our interpretation of the text. For why, during that whole Arian controversy which raged so fiercely and lasted so long, was this text never once quoted against the Arians, if it so clearly attested the Supreme Deity of Christ? “Those,” said Erasmus, “who contend that in this text Christ is clearly called God, either place little confidence in other passages of Scripture — deny all understanding to the Arians — or pay scarcely any attention to the style of the apostle. A similar passage occurs in 2 Cor. 11:31: ‘The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is blessed for ever’; the latter clause being undeniably restricted to the Father.”<sup>11</sup>

I pass now to another passage, from St. Paul’s first epistle to Timothy, where, it is alleged, the apostle speaks of Christ as “God . . . manifest in the flesh” (3:16). I might occupy much time in citations from various critics upon the true reading of this passage in the Greek. Suffice it to say that many, very many of the most reputed reject the word answering to God, and substitute the pronoun answering to “who” or “he who”; Griesbach, Wetstein, Lachmann, De Wette do this. Bishop Marsh says that “this reading (God) is found *a prima manu*<sup>12</sup> in not a single ancient manuscript in uncial letters (or capitals — the highest class of MSS.) nor in a single ancient version, except the Arabic, which is of very little authority.” Prof. Stuart, of our own country, who holds to the reading of our English version, nevertheless says that an attentive student of Scripture “will see that God might be manifest in the person of Christ without the necessary implication of the proper divinity (Deity) of the Savior.”<sup>13</sup> Here I leave the critics. I take the common reading. The Unitarian gladly believes that God did manifest Himself in Christ preeminently. He can as consistently and sincerely speak of Christ as “God manifest in the flesh” as any other Christian of any other name. Yes, I accept the statement to the full. I rejoice and bless God who has been pleased thus gloriously and graciously to manifest Himself in the person of His beloved Son our Lord. In him God comes near to man. His power and wisdom, his “grace and truth,” what were they all but God’s? So high do I place him in my devout contemplation and faith, that what he taught, commanded, threatened, or promised has with me all the weight and

<sup>11</sup> Erasmus Annot. in op. tom. vi, 611.

<sup>12</sup> At first hand, i.e. in the original manuscript.

<sup>13</sup> He refers to John 17:20-26; 1 John 1:3; 2:5; 4:15, 16.

authority which could belong to the same words were they audibly addressed to me by God Himself from the opened heavens. He is simply Inferior and Subordinate to God, because, from the necessity of the case, the Supreme can have no Equal.