

EDITORIAL

Councils Versus the Creed of Jesus

Doctrines to which we are emotionally attached, particularly from early training, die with the greatest difficulty. A 19th-century writer, Robert Hall, observing the vise-like grip which religious ideas exercise over the mind, states:

Nothing, it will be acknowledged, has a greater tendency to obstruct the spirit of inquiry, than the spirit and feeling of party. Let a doctrine, however erroneous, become a party distinction, and it is at once entrenched in interests and attachments which make it extremely difficult for the most powerful artillery of reason to dislodge it.¹

In no department of the theological enterprise is this truer than in that which deals with the doctrine of God Himself. The doctrine of the Incarnation has for nearly two millennia been the hallmark of Christian orthodoxy; and by Incarnation is meant the teaching that the eternal Son of God, the second member of the eternal Trinity, took on human flesh and died for the sins of mankind.

Any suggestion that this cardinal tenet might not be biblically based encounters immediate, passionate opposition from the defenders of the so-called historic Christian creed. At the level of popular American evangelicalism anyone who does not affirm that “Jesus is God” is numbered with the cultist and heretic, to be rated as a menace to the spiritual health and salvation of the orthodox.

The fury of the established party is understandable. After all, the Bible itself does constantly warn about the “wolves in sheep’s clothing” who disrupt the peace of the church. Scripture sees such workers as instruments of the Devil to be identified and condemned.

We who contribute to this *Journal from the Radical Reformation: A Testimony to Biblical Unitarianism* do so out of no desire to be disruptive.

¹ “Terms of Communion,” *Works*, Vol. 1, 352, cited by John Wilson in *Unitarian Principles Confirmed by Trinitarian Testimonies*, Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1848, 156.

We write because what we find in Scripture convinces us that all is not well with the proposition that "Jesus is God." At the simplest level there are two obvious reasons for our unhappiness with this unqualified identity of Jesus with God. Firstly, the Jewish heritage which Jesus confirmed when dealing with our question (Mark 12:28ff.) was monotheistic in an exclusive sense. Only Yahweh was the One God, and no other could claim that position. "The Lord our God" who is "one Lord" (Deut. 6:4) and denoted by singular personal pronouns thousands of times was a single divine Person. To say then that Jesus, who is evidently presented in the Bible as a distinct person from his Father, was also the One God would imply a doctrine of two Gods.

Secondly, the concept that the Son of God was coequal and coeternal with his Father appears to empty the word Son of any intelligible meaning. And to speak of an "eternal begetting," when the word beget means to bring into existence, seems only to add to the confusion. America's Bible Answer Man concedes that there is mystery in the orthodox doctrine such that we cannot hope to comprehend the Trinity. But we must and can apprehend it. The distinction he draws between these two words is not spelled out. We must somehow feel the difference and work hard to apprehend the incomprehensible. At the same time, according to the radio show which now deals with frequent questions bearing on the Trinity, we are to be sure that anyone who is shy of stating that "Jesus is God" is a "cult figure" and "distinctly unchristian."

The assertions of the orthodox camp invite careful investigation. Is it true that because Jesus is "worshipped" he must be God, since God alone is worshipped? It might be countered that since God cannot die, and Jesus died, he cannot be God. Is it true that because Jesus is called "Lord," it follows that he must be God?

Jesus was "worshipped" certainly, but so was David worshipped alongside the One God. First Chronicles 29:20 tells us that the people of Israel, without acting improperly, "fell prostrate [worshipped] before Yahweh and before the King." Revelation 3:9 describes a future scene in which the enemies of the faithful will be made to "worship" at their feet. These two examples show that the appearance of the word "worship" in reference to Jesus does not constitute proof that he himself is God. As Messiah, Jesus is undoubtedly worthy of high honor and reverence. Yet his exalted position as Lord does not at all constitute him God in the highest sense.

The constant allusion in the New Testament to Psalm 110:1 provides one of the most marvelous keys to New Testament Christology. In that psalm

Yahweh and the Messiah (the psalm was read as Messianic both by Jesus and his enemies) are distinct personal beings. But the Messiah in this prophetic oracle is definitely not identified as the One God. In his “oracle of Yahweh” David honors his son with the title *adoni*, my lord. What many Bible readers have not observed is that *adoni* in all 195 occurrences exclusively denotes a superior *who is not God Himself*. When God is called Lord He is 449 times addressed as *adonai*. Two different forms of the word for Lord are designed to signal the difference between God and man, however exalted. (The distinction is not discoverable in *Strong’s Concordance*.)

Of the greatest significance in the battle over the identity of the God of the Bible (and what doctrine can be more significant than this?) is the clear statement of a distinguished systematic theologian of our time. Dr. Colin Brown of Fuller Seminary clears away millennia of misunderstanding when he says in an article entitled “Trinity and Incarnation: In Search of Contemporary Orthodoxy”:

In the light of the biblical usage, the title “Son of God” is not in itself a designation of personal deity or an expression of metaphysical distinctions within the Godhead. Indeed, to be a “Son of God” one has to be a being who is *not* God. It is a designation for a creature indicating a special relationship with God. In particular it denotes God’s representative, God’s vice-regent. It is a designation of kingship, identifying the King as God’s Son It is a common but patent misreading of the opening of John’s Gospel to read it as if it said: “In the beginning was the *Son* and the *Son* was with God and the *Son* was God.”²

Here at last is the clue to a break in the deadlock over who God is. To our opponents we say, Have another look at the foundations on which your cherished notion of the Triune God is really based. Did Jesus the Jew really authorize that doctrine and thereby modify the creed of Deuteronomy 6:4? Or are you emotionally and intellectually attached to a post-biblical tradition which despite its long success nevertheless betrays the Jewish Jesus who acknowledged the One God as his Father? His closest and best-instructed followers still understood that God was “the God *of* our Lord Jesus Messiah.” “God” and “Lord,” when referred respectively to the Deity and the Messiah, therefore do not describe persons of the same rank.

² *Ex Auditu*, 7, 1991, 88, 89.