

Lecture 23 – The Deity of Christ in the Synoptic Gospels

Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!” Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” John 20:28-29 (NIV)

Key Terms

Nicene/Chalcedonian orthodoxy, *monogenes theos*

Objectives

*To outline and briefly describe Jesus claims to deity as they relate to the rest of His ministry, to the surrounding religious context, and to the surrounding cultural context

Lead Questions

In what ways did Jesus claim to be God? How would you present Christ’s claims of deity to a non-believer? What might be some objections that a non-believer has to these claims? How would you respond with grace and confidence?

Commitment to the Kingdom: Matthew 19-20

Thesis: By neglecting Jesus’ pervasive indirect claims to deity in the synoptics, evangelicals have given comfort to their theological adversaries and impoverished their understanding of Jesus. He manifested awareness of His deity throughout His ministry in frequent, varied actions and teachings that rightly issue from God alone. The topic is “Functional Christology.”

I. The Self-Consciousness of Jesus in Critical Thought

- A. NT invites questions: Jesus grew in wisdom and stature (Lk. 2:52). He learned obedience (Heb 5:8).
- B. The critical Jesus is vaguely “divine” yet unaware of His deity. Two axioms:
 1. Jesus cannot be the God-man (truly God, truly man) of Nicene/Chalcedonian orthodoxy.
 2. There is no sharp disjunction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith.
- C. Common critical argument (with immense variation) follows
 1. Jesus lacked self-awareness of deity; He never claimed deity in the sense of pre-existence.
 2. The church has called Jesus divine. We are Christians; we call Him divine too.
 3. But we must call Him divine in a way the historical Jesus would approve.
 4. Therefore He is not God of very God. He had a prototypical consciousness of God. Jesus is divine in that He is/was totally open to God.
- D. Two representatives
 1. MacQuarrie: We live in a modern world, yet Christians. The old professor: “Church has preserved some authentic material about Jesus’ deeds or sayings, but we cannot be sure which.”¹

The strongest Christology arises after Easter.² Mark’s true testimony is to the humanity of Jesus, his reluctance to produce signs of deity.³ Mark’s Jesus is divine, but only as the Spirit-filled man.⁴ Paul’s Jesus is not pre-existent Son of God but the new man “who has transcended the ordinary reaches of humanity” and moves it “into new possibilities.”⁵

¹ MacQuarrie, 73. Section describes 70-80

² MacQuarrie, 72-76.

³ MacQuarrie, 78-79.

⁴ MacQuarrie, 81.

⁵ MacQuarrie, 48-68, esp. 65-67.

2. J. A. T. Robinson: "John's Jesus is a man of power because he is a man of prayer."⁶ He is the Father's agent, commissioned to act with sender's authority. He claims nothing for himself, but simply represents God.⁷ He is not "The invader from another world." Where John 1:18 says Jesus is *μονογενής θεός* (*monogenes theos*, "one and only God") it "was a slip." John meant *μονογενής υἱός* (*monogenes huios*, "one and only son").
3. Yet both MacQuarrie and Robinson say Jesus is savior. MacQuarrie: Jesus' life is a ransom that saves humanity, but not as a propitiation for human sins. Jesus saves by commending "the life of service as opposed to a life of rule and self assertion." The cross requires people to die to values of the world and be united with Christ in his new life.⁸ Robinson: Sin is selfishness. Jesus saves mankind from it by His example.

E. The critical view and a poor reply:

4. "The early church believed Jesus had Messianic self-awareness. But it arose out of belief in his resurrection."⁹
 1. Evangelicals' neglect of synoptic Christology has abetted critics. Statistics

II. Implicit Christology in the Synoptic Gospels

A. Three theses

1. The synoptics constantly express an implicit Christology, growing from Jesus' self-consciousness. This suffuses the synoptics. One cannot excise a few "post-Easter insertions."
2. Jesus acted out of an awareness of His deity and messiahship throughout His ministry.
3. Jesus exercised the functions, assumed prerogatives and accepted honors that belong to God alone. He acts on the basis of assumed deity in almost every pericope of Gospels.

B. Other work along this line:

1. Jesus' claims to forgive sins, bestow life, teach truth, and judge world all imply deity.¹⁰
2. Pannenberg: Jesus speaks on his own authority. He can gain nothing by appealing to another, since no higher authority exists.¹¹
3. I.H. Marshall, *The Origins of NT Christology*.

III. Jesus' Implicit Claims to Deity

Jesus implicitly claimed deity in over twelve ways. He claimed divine rights. He 1) judged mankind, 2) forgave sins 3) granted eternal life. He makes 9 other claims almost silently.

A. Familiar claims of deity

1. Jesus judges mankind. He knows thoughts, (Matt 9:4, 12:25, 22:18). So He will judge mankind on the last day (Matt 7:22, 23), pronounce weal or woe (Matt. 25:34, 41).
2. Jesus forgave sins (Luke 5:17-26, 7:36-50). He determined who would be forgiven (Luke 18:9-14). Healing of paralytic is crucial. Jesus declared, "Friend, your sins are forgiven," then, "So that you may know the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins... Implication: "I have forgiven him, I do claim to be God, and I will prove both by healing him now."
3. Jesus bestowed eternal life. Jesus offered eternal life to the rich young ruler if he sold all and followed Him (Matt. 19:16-21). To bestow the K is to bestow life (Matt 5:3, 10).
4. Jesus' presence is God's presence. Jesus said of Himself, "One greater than the temple is here (Matt. 12:6)." The temple is God's dwelling place; only God's presence in the person

⁶ Robinson, 349.

⁷ Robinson, 350-52.

⁸ MacQuarrie, 82-84.

⁹ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, (2 vols.; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951, 1955), 1.26.

¹⁰ Stott, *Christianity*, 29-32.

¹¹ Pannenberg, Jesus, 53-60. Pannenberg does not believe the claim proves anything by itself. The claim has to be vindicated before it is significant.

of Jesus could be greater. Jesus claimed omnipresence in Matthew 18:20, 28:18). In Himself, the Kingdom of God has arrived (Luke 11:14-22, cf. 4:16-21).

5. Eternal destinies depend on response to Jesus (Matt. 7:21-27, 10:32-33). Disciples must love Him more than father or mother, son or daughter. Anyone unwilling to forfeit his life for Christ will lose it forever (Matt 10:37-9, 16:24-6, Luke 14:26-7, Mark 8:34-8). Jesus summons people to love Him more than anyone, to keep His commands even if that means death. If an ordinary man said such things, he would seem a blasphemer or a madman.
6. Jesus identifies actions toward Him with actions toward God. Knowing Jesus is knowing God (John 8:19), seeing him is seeing God (12:45, 14:7-9). Same regarding faith (12:44, 14:1) and animosity (15:23). Matthew says “He who receives you receives me and he who receives me receives the one who sent me” (10:40, cf. Mark 9:37).

B. Neglected claims of deity

1. Jesus taught the truth on His own authority. OT prophets insisted their message was God’s, not their own (Jer. 20:7-12, cf. 1:6-8, Amos 7:14-17, cf. 3:8). They said, “This is what the Lord says...The word of the Lord came to me.” Intertestamental literature continued this.
 - a. Jesus emphasized His own authority when he spoke. He said His words make men wise (Matt. 7:24), never fail (24:35), and must be taught to the nations (28:18-19). Jesus emphasized His authority through the word: “αμην” (*amen*).
 - b. Jesus often introduced teaching saying “αμην λεγω υμιν,” (*amen lego humin*, “truly I say to you”): 30 in Matt., 13 in Mark, 6 in Luke, 25 in John. The “αμην” (*amen*) asserts certainty and potency. Jesus’ words are true because He says them. He also uses the formula in disputes.
 - i. Example: Nicodemus in John 3:3, 5; Matt. 6:2, 5,16; 18:3; Luke 13:35; John 5:19, 24, 25; 6:26, 32, 47, 53.
 - c. αμην, λεγω υμιν (*amen lego humin*, “truly I say to you”) punctuates new teaching; Jesus’ words are true because He utters them (Matt. 24:34, 26:13, Mark 3:28, Luke 12:37, John 10:27). He is final interpreter of the OT, saying, in Matthew 5, “You have heard that it was said..., but I say to you.”
 - d. All people (including rabbis) support strong assertions by quoting authorities. But in synoptics, Jesus never legitimated His teaching by appeal to another authority because that would imply the legitimating authority was higher than Jesus. So Jesus asseverates His own authority.
 - e. In the OT God’s words participate in His character. God’s word, and God Himself, stands forever (Isa. 40:6-8, 51:6; Ps. 102:25-7) and accomplishes its purpose (Isa. 55:11, 46:9-11).
 - f. Jesus’ teaching has same divine character as God’s. God’s word must be fulfilled (Matt 5:18), so must Jesus’ words, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but his words will not” (24:34-5).
 - g. Jesus ignored reams of rabbinic rules on Sabbath, saying, “Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath” (Matt. 12:3-8). Who can declare the correct interpretation of God’s law? God alone.
2. Jesus performed miracles on His own authority. In miracles of OT and Acts, God’s agents give credit to the Lord, if issue arises.
 - a. In synoptics, Jesus does not give credit to the Father. He heals by His power, because He wills it, and to His praise. Examples:
 - i. The leper: “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.” Jesus reached out and touched the leper. “I am willing,” He said, “Be clean.” And he was cured (Matt. 8:2-3).

- ii. Centurion pleaded for His suffering servant. Jesus, “I will go and heal him.” (8:5-13).
 - iii. Blind men sitting outside Jericho ask Jesus to have mercy on them. Jesus asked, “What do you want me to do for you?” They ask for their sight, and He grants it (Matt. 20:29-34).
 - iv. Jesus’ diction - “I am willing...What do you want me to do?” - implies He can do what He wishes, without consulting. He neither asks God for power, nor ascribes His power to God. Jesus does not mind that miracles prompt question, “Who is this?” (Matt 8:27, 14:33; John 6:14, 7:31).
- b. In OT and Acts miracle workers deflect attention from selves to God. Examples:
- i. When Israel demanded water from Moses he said only God could provide it (Ex. 17:1-7).
 - ii. Jericho asks Elisha to heal their water; he says Lord decided to heal it (2 Kgs. 2:19-21).
 - iii. Food for widow at Zarephath is God’s decision and action (1 Kgs. 17:14).
 - iv. At fiery furnace, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego confess God might or might not deliver, as He willed (Dan 3:17 18).
 - v. Apostles heal in name of Jesus, assert that power is from Him (Acts 3:6-16).
 - vi. When Lystrans think Paul and Barnabas might be gods, they are horrified (Acts 14:8-18).
 - vii. Exceptions prove the rule: Moses punished for taking glory to himself (Num. 20:2-12).
- c. Conclusion: Apostles and prophets present public miracles as acts of God, lest someone praise them. But Jesus lets the praise come to Him.
Jesus’ style: No rituals or incantations; rarely even prayer. Jesus acts because He chooses to. He is not motivated by forces outside Himself.¹² To supplicants, He simply says, “I am willing, I will go, I will do it.” Void of egotism, neither is Jesus self-effacing.
3. Jesus receives obeisance. Caveats. Many “fall” or “bow” - *πιπτω, προσκυνεω* (*pipto, proskuneo*) before Jesus; He never says, “Get up” (Mark 5:27, 33; Luke 5:8). Falling (*πιπτω*) seems “worshipful” at transfiguration (Matt 17:6), after the resurrection (Matt. 28:9, Luke 24:52), and for magi (2:11).
- a. Ten lepers in Luke 17:15-19. First, leper prostrated self before Christ. His posture and language seem worshipful. Jesus asked 3 questions, then lets him rise. He allowed leper to remain at His feet while praising God. If Jesus were not God, He should ask people to rise at once.
 - b. In NT no one may fall (*πιπτω*) or bow (*προσκυνεω*) to anyone but Jesus.¹³ When humans try to worship men or angels, they get a stiff rebuke (Acts 14:14-18, Rev. 19:10, 22:8).¹⁴
4. Jesus assumes His life is a pattern for others. Jesus had to deny His family; a disciple must too (Luke 8:19-21, 14:25-26). Jesus lived without a home; therefore disciple must too (Luke 9:57-58). Same regarding fasting (Matt 11:19, 9:14-17) and the cross (16:21-26). Jesus even offered Himself to opponents as example of free fellowship (Luke 14:13, 15:1-2). Paul offers self as example too, but does not assume it.

¹² Gruenler, *New Approaches*, 156.

¹³ Unless one counts the parable of the unforgiving servant, where two servants who fall down in homage (Matt 18:26, 19).

¹⁴ France suggests two different texts where disciples may be worshipping Jesus, Matt 14:33 and John 9:38; France, “Worship”, 27.

5. Jesus applies OT texts describing God to Himself. After triumphal entry Jewish leaders complain to Jesus regarding His praise from children. He replies, "From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise" (Ps. 8:2). Since Psalm 8 is addressed "O Lord, our Lord," Jesus is applying an OT passage about God to Himself.¹⁵
6. Jesus is a divine figure in His own parables. When Jesus made Himself a divine figure in His own parable, He implicitly claimed deity, and prerogatives of deity shown in parables.

Conclusion: Jesus' indirectly claimed deity many ways and many times, by exercising the functions, assuming the prerogatives, or accepting honors that properly belong to God alone. He advanced every type of claim several times. He made them throughout His ministry, from His first words (Matt 5:17-46, Mark 2:23-28, Luke 4:18-27) and first works in Galilee (Luke 5:12-26, Mark 1:40-2:12, Matt. 8:1-13), to His last words on the cross (Luke 23:43). No sane Jewish man of the time could have staked all these claims by accident. They rose naturally from Jesus' continuous self-consciousness of His deity.

**How would you explain the relationship between Jesus' miracles and His deity to someone (Christian or non-Christian) who was an anti-supernaturalist?*

**What role might the miracles play in an evangelistic relationship? What role might they play in a discipleship relationship?*

¹⁵ R. T. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 310.