

The Deity of Christ in the Synoptic Gospels

At the end of Matthew 20, Jesus makes several implicit claims to deity. He assumed, for example, that His life would be a pattern for ours. Only God has the right to assume that all people made in His image should conform to His image, so that was an implicit claim of deity. And when He goes through the poetic parallelism, He calls Himself the Son of Man who came to give His life as a ransom, which is saying He is greater than great and also that His life can be a ransom for many. These are all points at which Jesus makes implicit claims of deity.

This is an important issue if you want to talk with unbelievers about the nature of the identity of Christ. Almost every unbeliever that you will meet will have a good opinion of Christ. Not all, but almost all will think He was a good man, a wise man, a good teacher, who did good and could tell us the way of life, and they will have various other good opinions of that sort. The sticking point is not whether He was good but whether He is God. That is the question. If you will spend a substantial amount of time with unbelievers, you need to know some things about the attitude of unbelievers toward the Gospels and the testimony of the Gospels toward Christ. For now I will address opinion leaders; you may not run into these ideas on the street, but these are the ideas that eventually influence the people that you run into on the street.

Almost every paragraph of the Gospels in some way points to the deity of Christ. So by neglecting the power and pervasiveness of Jesus' indirect claims to deity, especially in the synoptic Gospels, evangelicals have given comfort to their theological adversaries and impoverished their own understanding of Jesus' person. Jesus manifested an awareness of His deity throughout His ministry in regular, frequent, and varied actions and teachings that rightly issue from God alone. To put it very simply: He was constantly doing or saying things that only God has the right to do or say. He was constantly acting on the assumption that He is God. He was doing things that only fit for someone who thought, believed, or knew that He is God.

In the academic world, one liberal critic named J.A.T. Robinson, pointed out that the self-consciousness of Jesus has become something of a 'no-go' area for New Testament theology. People simply do not want to dwell on the question, "What did Jesus think about Himself?" It is a sad fact that it is also probably true of many evangelicals, at least as they read Matthew, Mark and Luke. The Gospels actually invite us to consider what Jesus thought of Himself in a couple of little statements. In Luke 2:52 it says that Jesus grew in wisdom and stature. That invites us to consider how He grew in understanding or when He came to realize who He was or how He had that confirmed in His life. There is not an answer given, but it invites questions. Hebrews 5:8 also intrigues us when it says Jesus learned obedience by what He suffered. What might that mean? In these ways we get hints that we have the right to think about what Jesus thought of Himself.

People who believe the Bible do not spend much time on that these days, and if we do not we forfeit the game, we forfeit the debate to critics who will very often say that Jesus was vaguely divine without being aware of His deity. The crucial point is that they believe that Jesus did not hold in His mind the concept, "I am God; I am divine." They would say Jesus is divine but not that He thought of Himself as divine. The ancient church creeds established that Jesus is God, fully God, and fully equal to God. They use the word *homoousia*, 'of the same substance,' not similar, but the same substance as God. The next doctrine established was that Jesus is fully God and fully man—one person with two natures. The critics say those ideas are not anything that Jesus believed or taught or the early church taught; it is something that centuries later the Christian church decided.

On the other hand, the critics say they want to keep contact with the historical Jesus. They do not want to split the Jesus who lived and taught in Palestine and was a Mediterranean peasant or a cynic Jew or a wisdom teacher. They say they do not want to separate the Christ of faith that the church believes in from the Jesus of history. So they want to keep them together while still denying Jesus' full deity. They do that in essentially four steps. First, Jesus had no self-awareness of His deity. He never claimed deity in the sense of pre-existence. Second, the church has called Jesus divine, and since many of the critics maintain that they are part of the church, they also want to call Him divine too. Third, they say that we have to call Him divine in a way that the historical Jesus would approve. That is, while they deny that He is very God of very God, eternally God, they say that a consciousness of God was present and revealed in a unique and prototypical way in Jesus. Thus Jesus was most aware of God, and He was the first of a new breed of people who are aware and open to God. He was the most open person to God who ever lived and He opened the path for others to be open to God as well. The fourth thing they will say is they will agree that Jesus is the Savior, that He gave His life for many. But they do not understand that truth in the same way the church has traditionally understood it. They will argue that in His voluntary death Jesus commended the life of service and sacrifice rather than selfishness.

John MacQuarrie, a theologian and philosopher in the late twentieth century, who wrote a book called *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*, provides a good survey and summary of the support for these views. He argues that in a modern scientific age we cannot believe in miracles, demons, angels, God and heaven above. The most difficult notion of all for a Christian is that Jesus of Nazareth is the pre-existent God, who came to earth as a man. So MacQuarrie compares the situation of modern Christians with that of being at a university where there was a beloved old professor who had died about ten or fifteen years ago. Many stories would circulate about the beloved professor and nobody would really know any more which stories are true and which stories are false. If you take the true stories and the false stories together, however, they give a pretty good picture of what he was like anyway. So even if he did not actually do the things that are false, they would be like the kinds of things he would have done and that would be why the stories circulated in the first place. MacQuarrie says that is the way the Gospels are. We do not know what is true and what is false, but they give us kind of a picture of Jesus. He then admits that the picture hints at a claim to deity, but there are also claims of humanity, which he says are much stronger and more persistent in the Gospels. He would say that the claims of deity mainly arose after Easter, and thus they were put into Jesus' mouth by the church after He died and after they believed He rose. That is how many of the critics who also want to maintain a Christian identity deal with the Gospels.

They go on to say that Jesus is the Son, but He is the Son in the sense that He is most open to seeing God as His father. After all, they say, we are all sons of God; Jesus was just the prototypical son of God. He was more a son of God than any of the rest of us were or could be. He is a man of God in the sense that He is a man of prayer. He is the agent of God as the one who is known and loved by God the way no one else was ever known and loved by God. This is all part of an ethical soteriology. An ethical soteriology is that Jesus saves us by His ethic, by giving us His teaching and example. By saving us ethically we admire Jesus' devotion, His suffering, and His willingness to do whatever needed to be done for the sake of the truth and the cause of God. Even though Jesus is not really the Christ, He serves as the one that God chose to use to bring people back to Himself. A major problem that becomes evident with this construct is that ultimately we are saving ourselves by looking at the example of Christ. But it is a very prevalent view of Jesus.

Unfortunately evangelicals have played into the hands of the critics to a surprising degree. One way we have done so is by basing far too much of our Christology on the Gospel of John. We have done that because of all the explicit "I am" statements in John. But critics often dismiss John's Gospel as a late

production that is highly philosophical and not written by the apostle John anyway. Thus if you appeal to John among university educated people, you are appealing to the book that has the least credibility in their minds. It would be better to appeal to Matthew, Mark and Luke, which are considered by critics to be more reliable because they are earlier. If you just quote a few of the most significant passages in those Gospels, however, the critics may dismiss them too. Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ, for example, is explained away as an insertion by the church after Easter. And likewise many critics will explain away some of the other significant and explicit statements about Jesus' divinity by claiming that they do not fit their context and so they must be made up. In these ways, if we allow the critics to do away with the Gospel of John and then several of the most significant passages in the synoptic Gospels, they feel they have made their case.

Evangelicals should not allow the critics to get away with this. The deity of Christ is pervasive in the Gospels, and you have to eradicate almost every shred of the Gospels to eradicate Jesus' deity. It is not because He is claiming that He is God, but because He is saying and doing the things that only God does in almost every paragraph and passage of the Gospels. By neglecting those powerful ideas we are giving comfort to our adversaries and allowing them to have an impoverished understanding of Jesus as a person. Furthermore, Jesus constantly acted out of an awareness of His deity from the beginning of His ministry, not just at the end. And Jesus proved the awareness that He had of His own deity by exercising the functions, assuming the prerogatives, and accepting the honors that only God has the right to accept.

First of all Jesus claims to judge mankind, not just on one occasion but on several occasions. Jesus claimed to know the thoughts, the inner attitudes, and the hypocrisies of men. Furthermore, He predicted that He will judge mankind on the last day. In the Sermon on the Mount, right at the beginning of His ministry, He said, "On the last day many of you will say, 'Lord, Lord,' but I will say 'I never knew you.'" Then in Matthew 13 Jesus tells a parable in which "the Son of Man will send His angels to remove the evildoers from His kingdom." And in Matthew 16:27 Jesus says He will reward each person according to what He has done. In Matthew 24 and 25, Jesus is going to summon the nations before His glorious throne and He is going to say, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, you evildoers." To others, to His sheep, He will say, "Come into the blessedness prepared by my Father." Jesus says not once or twice but on a number of occasions that He knows men's hearts, that He will judge the world, and that He will call everyone to account for everything they have done. All those things require deity. Only God can judge a person for everything he has done. And Jesus says He will do it.

The second function Jesus assumes is the ability to forgive sins. When the paralytic was lowered through the roof, Jesus told him his sins were forgiven. In claiming the ability to forgive sins, Jesus is claiming deity. There is also the story of the woman in Luke 7 who came to Jesus, to anoint Him, and then she started to weep at His feet and wipe His feet with her hair. Jesus also forgave her sins. In the parable of the tax collector and the publican, Jesus tells a story of the Pharisee who stands there saying, "I thank you, Lord, that I am not like other men." And then He says there is also a publican who is beating his breast saying, "Lord, have mercy on me a sinner." Jesus then says the publican went home justified. Only God can say who will be justified before Him. Only the Judge can say how the judgment will turn out.

A third claim that Jesus makes that implies deity, which is related to these other two, is that He bestows eternal life. This is perhaps most closely associated with John's Gospel, but we could also think of the rich young ruler who asks, "What good thing must I do?" Jesus says, "If you want to know what good thing to do, then sell everything, come follow me and then you will have eternal life." So Jesus gives the conditions for life. And also we can think of the Beatitudes which begin, "Blessed are the poor in spirit,

for theirs is the kingdom.” Jesus, in other words, declares who will have the kingdom. Jesus declares who will see God.

A fourth point is the idea that Jesus’ presence is God’s presence. This came up in Matthew 12 in a disagreement He had with the Pharisees. Jesus was questioned for why He let His disciples thresh the grain and eat it on the Sabbath. “Why are you doing what’s unlawful?” they ask. Jesus answers, “Do you not remember David and His men, and how they went into the temple and they took the show bread?” And then He adds, “But I tell you that something greater than the temple is here.” The temple is the dwelling place of God. It is not as though God literally dwelt in that one spot and no other, but the temple made it clear to the Israelites that God’s presence was with them. Jesus is saying that something greater than the temple is here—manifestation of God among them, but God Himself is here. That is another claim to deity. Along the same lines would be when Jesus said, “Whenever two or three of you gather to pray about any matter, there I am in your midst.” That is a claim of omnipresence, and only God is omnipresent. Again at the end of the Gospel of Matthew Jesus said, “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” When Jesus says “I am with you always,” He is saying “I am God.” He is not saying it explicitly; He is saying it implicitly. He is making a claim that only God has the right to make.

A fifth implicit claim of deity is when Jesus says that the eternal destiny of humans depends on their response to Him. Matthew 7 indicates that if you know Jesus, you go to heaven. In Matthew 10:32-33 Jesus says, “Whoever acknowledges me before men I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. Whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.” So if you acknowledge Him, He will be your advocate and you will go to heaven. Then there are statements in which Jesus claims that if we do not love Him more than our father and mother, or if we do not take up our crosses and follow Him, we are not worthy of Him. We must love Him more than anyone else. Jesus also says, “You must keep My commands even if it costs you your life.” For Jesus to say that, either He is God or He is insane. There is no middle ground on this. When He says we must give up everything for His sake, and we have to die for Him, He is saying that His life is worth more than ours. Since we are all God’s creatures, only His life is worth more than ours. This is a claim Jesus makes many times over in each Gospel.

In the sixth place, Jesus equates actions toward Him with actions toward God. To know Him is to know God. To see Him is to see God. To believe in Jesus is to believe in God. To hate Him is to hate God. To receive Him is to receive God. To welcome Him is to welcome God. In these ways Jesus is saying that if you do something unto Him it is as if you have done it unto God.

Seventh, Jesus taught the truth on His own authority. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew says He taught not like the scribes, but He taught with authority. At the very end of the Gospel, Matthew gives His disciples all authority and says that what He has taught them must be taught to the nations. His teaching becomes the content of what the nations need to know in order to be disciples. Not only does He say that, but He also teaches in a way that no one else teaches. In the Old Testament the prophets introduced their remarks by saying, “The Lord says.” Jesus taught by saying, “I say.” And on 70 occasions Jesus prefaced His remarks by saying, “Truly, truly.” He also takes the Old Testament deeper and says He does so on His authority. Usually when someone is going to say something controversial, he quotes an authority, and in that way he establishes his credibility through theirs. Jesus never does that. He is the authority, so He only quotes Himself. Furthermore, Jesus says in Matthew 24:35, “Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will never pass away.” So Jesus’ words outlast creation, just as in the Old Testament God often claims eternity for His Word. And Jesus repeatedly ignored reams of rabbinic teaching on the Sabbath, because He said the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.

The eighth implicit claim to deity is that Jesus performed miracles on His own authority. In the Old Testament whenever an agent of God describes how he does God's work, he always ascribes his miracle to God's will and God's power. When Jesus performs miracles, however, He never ascribes them to God. When the paralytic fell at Jesus' feet and said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean," Jesus reached out and touched him and said simply, "I am willing, be clean." And when Jesus was going to heal the centurion's servant, Jesus said, "I will go and heal him." He does not say something like, "If God is willing I will go heal him." Then when Jesus performs a miracle, He does not say, "Do not praise me, praise God." We are allowed to praise Him.

Ninth, Jesus receives obeisance. This comes up in several of the miracle scenes. I do not want to say they worship, because to offer Him worship, you have to know who He is and I think people often knelt or bowed before Jesus to give Him great honor. That is why I use the word obeisance, as it is a very strong word. It is not one we use often, but it is a very strong word for giving honor to someone as to a king. It means something stronger than bowing, but it is weaker than worship. When an ordinary human being has somebody kneel on the ground before him, it feels uncomfortable. But when Jesus healed ten lepers, and only one came back to kneel before Him, He asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" This scene shows that it is okay to bow at Jesus' feet and praise God, there is nothing wrong with that. When other biblical characters have someone kneel before them—such as an angel, Peter, Paul, and Barnabas—they are horrified. But Jesus lets somebody fall at His feet and bow before Him and praise God, by which He is implicitly claiming deity.

The tenth point is that Jesus assumes that His life is a pattern for ours. Jesus denied His family; He says the disciples have to deny their families. Jesus lived without a home; the disciples have to live without a home. Jesus refrained from fasting; so His disciples refrain from fasting. Jesus went to the cross; He says His disciples will go to the cross. Jesus went to eat with rich and poor, with Pharisees and tax collectors; He says we should associate with rich and poor and Pharisees and tax collectors. He does not argue it; He just assumes it. He understands it; it is natural. There are a number of passages where that applies.

Number eleven, Jesus applies Old Testament descriptions of God to Himself. For example, Psalm 8 begins, "Oh, Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name and all the earth." It is a psalm to God. Then in 8:2 it says, "From the lips of children and infants, You have ordained praise for Yourself." Yet when Jesus enters Jerusalem and the children cry, "Hosanna," He explains that this statement about the way children praise God applies to Him. He knows that in saying this He is claiming to be God. It is the same with the statements about His words. Isaiah 40:8 says that "the Word of the Lord stands forever," and Jesus says His words stand forever.

The twelfth and final claim is that Jesus puts Himself repeatedly in His parables as the divine figure. He puts a divine figure in most of His full-size parables and if you examine them carefully, you will notice that not only does the divine figure do things that God would do, but the divine figure also does what Jesus does. For instance, in the parable of the lost sons, the father is like God seeking the lost so there is rejoicing with the angels in heaven. In other words, in God's presence, there is rejoicing when the lost are found, and if this is true of the sheep and the coin, then it is true of the father. In the same way Jesus is seeking the lost—the lost sinners and the lost self-righteous Pharisees. In the parable of the banquet, the king is welcoming people to his banquet. Jesus also welcomes all sorts of people to Himself.

If you put all these points together, you do not have merely twelve claims, but twelve claims each appearing several times. He uses the words "truly, truly" 70 times. Jesus is a divine figure in His own

parables ten times. Jesus forgives sins about five times. There are well over 100 here, on a conservative count. Jesus is constantly operating on an awareness of who He is. Everything He does, everything He says, all of His miracles, all of His teaching, His atonement, the idea that He can give His life as a ransom for many, all assume that He is God. The Gospels themselves constantly assume that these are not the good teachings of a good man, but rather this is God with us. This is Immanuel; this is the Lord whom we ought to worship. That is the foundation for the faith of Christianity, and we need to be ready with answers not only to encourage ourselves, but also for those who see it otherwise and would reduce Jesus to mere goodness or greatness.