

The Deity of Jesus Christ

Three Witnesses

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Introduction

Why do Christians identify Jesus as God? It seems that the authors of the New Testament could have done more to affirm this doctrine if it was indeed true. Some groups in church history (Arians, Jehovah's Witnesses) have viewed Jesus as less than God. Of course, many non-Christians (e.g., Muslims) are willing to concede that Jesus was a respectable teacher and moral example, but certainly not God the Son. What, then, is the basis for believing that God took on flesh in the person of Jesus Christ?

The Witness of the Prophets

The Old Testament prophets gave some indication that Messiah would be more than human. For example, Micah foretold Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, noting, however, that he had existed since eternity past (5:2; cf. Matt. 2:6). Isaiah referred to Messiah as *Immanuel*—that is, “God with us” (7:14; cf. Matt. 1:22-23). While this may not be a straightforward attribution of deity, it nevertheless indicates a close, unique relationship between Yahweh and Messiah. The same can be said of Isaiah's reference to David's heir as “The mighty God, The everlasting Father” (9:6). These texts certainly draw attention to Messiah's unique nature.

The Witness of Jesus

Jesus' self-testimony contributes significantly to our understanding of his nature. We can learn from both his words and his works, as well as from his hearers' responses. While he did not overtly say, “I am God,” he definitely made statements that his fellow Jews interpreted as such. He claimed that he was the giver of life (John 8:51); that God was his Father (John 8:54); that he had existed before Abraham (John 8:58); that he and his Father were one (John 10:30); that he did his Father's works (John 10:37); and that he would one day sit in majesty on God's right hand (Matt. 26:64). On several occasions his radical claims prompted the Jews to capture or stone him (e.g., Matt. 26:63-66; John 8:53-59; 10:24-40).

Not only did Jesus' words witness to his divine nature, his works did so as well. His many miracles led even skeptics to concede that he had come from God (John 3:2). In fact, his miracles were apparently designed to lead others to believe in him as the Son of God. For example, he healed a man so that his audience would acknowledge that he had the authority to forgive sins (Matt. 9:2-6). He referred to his works as a witness (John 10:25), and called on his hearers to believe because of the works even if they doubted his words (John 10:37-38).

The Witness of the Apostles

The apostles likewise affirmed the deity of Jesus. John identified Jesus as the Word—God, with God in the beginning, responsible for creating all things, dwelling in human flesh, bringing believers into sonship with God (1:1-3, 11, 14). Thomas called him “Lord” and “God” (John 20:28). Paul stated that though he had been “in the form of God,” he was willing to empty himself and suffer death on our behalf (Phil. 2:6ff). He claimed that all the fullness of the

Godhead resided in Christ in bodily form (Col. 2:9). Paul also referred to Christ as “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15).

The author of Hebrews referred to Jesus as “the express image of [God’s] person” (1:3); as Redeemer (1:3); as worthy of angels’ worship (1:6); as Creator and Sustainer of the universe (1:10-12); and as seated in majesty on God’s right hand (1:3, 8, 13). Peter identified Jesus as God, Savior, and Lord (2 Peter 1:1-2).

Conclusion

There is much more evidence to support the view that Jesus Christ was indeed equal with God in essence (though subordinate in function within the Godhead). The early church struggled to reach a doctrinal position that balanced the fact of Jesus’ complete humanity with that of his full deity. Eventually, though, the mainstream of Christianity came to such a balance.

Why is the doctrine of Christ’s deity important? First, it enables us to understand the true nature of our redemption. In order for us to be saved, God had to execute judgment on our sin. This he did in the person of Jesus Christ. Thus God satisfied the demands of his righteousness at his own cost. The deity of Christ also assures of the efficacy of his sacrifice. There might be some doubt as to the worthiness of his work were he any less than God.

Second, the doctrine of Christ’s deity gives us a clearer picture of prayer and worship. God intends for us to develop a personal relationship with him through the person of Christ. We pray to God in the name of Jesus (John 14:13-14). We worship Jesus himself (Rev. 1:5-6). We rely on his ongoing intercession (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25). In all of our dealings with Jesus we relate to him not merely as God’s agent, but as the incarnate Son of God.

Bibliography

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