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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_evangelical\\_quarterly.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php)

## OUR LORD'S SELF-WITNESS<sup>1</sup>

WE have reviewed, very briefly but as fully as time allowed, the Apostolic teaching on the Person of Christ. We have seen very clearly, I think, that, as Denney put it, "Christianity never existed in the world as a religion in which men shared the faith of Jesus, but was from the beginning, and amid all undeniable diversities, a religion in which Jesus was the object of faith. To all believers Jesus belonged to the divine as truly as to the human sphere".<sup>2</sup>

This Apostolic conception of Christ involves the idea that He is related to God in a manner which is unprecedented and solitary. "We beheld His glory," John says, "glory as of an Only-Begotten from a Father," and in such words he only echoes the testimony of the whole Apostolical circle, of the whole company of First Century believers. There is a mystery here which eludes us. "It carries us up and up to the third heaven," as Dr. Alexander Smellie said. "It takes us behind the veil into the Most Holy Place. Father and Son are alone, a tie binds them which saints and angels do not share; the divine nature which is in the First Person passes undiminished into the Second Person; the communication of its powers and its blessednesses is without limit, without hindrance, overflowing and free."<sup>3</sup>

"They had him into the study," Bunyan narrates of his pilgrim, "where they showed him records of the greatest antiquity; in which, as I remember my dream, they showed him first the Pedigree of the Lord of the Hill, that He was the Son of the Ancient of Days and came by an eternal generation." The Son of the Ancient of Days who comes by an eternal generation, the Fellow and the Equal of God, the Only-Born—that is our Christ. His oneness with the Father is unique, has ever been so, and will remain so to the ages of the ages.

<sup>1</sup> The last of three addresses given at the I.V.F. Conference at Bonskeid, Scotland, March, 1940.

<sup>2</sup> Denney, *Jesus and the Gospel*, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> Smellie, *His Glory*, pp. 16 and 17.

The question which we have before us to-day is this—what justification for such a conception of Christ can be found in His own self-consciousness, in His own witness to Himself, in His own express words?

## I

We find that Jesus lays claim to two unmistakably divine functions. He claims that He has authority now on earth to forgive sins, and He announces that He is one day to be man's Judge.

Take the first claim. Dr. A. B. Bruce, in his *Kingdom of God*,<sup>1</sup> made the utterly astounding statement that, when Jesus said, "The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins", what He meant was that God "is willing that it (i.e., the privilege of forgiving) should be exercised by all on earth in whom dwells His own spirit; and My right to forgive rests on this, that I am a sympathetic friend of the sinful, full of the grace and charity of heaven". That does really strike me as an utterly astounding statement, and one that looks very like a *reductio ad absurdum* of exegesis.

In calling Himself the "Son of Man" Jesus meant that He was the Head of the Kingdom of God, the Son of Man of the seventh chapter of Daniel, whose home is with the Ancient of Days, whose Kingdom is to be an everlasting Kingdom. One of His prerogatives as the Representative, *the* unique Representative of God on earth, is to forgive sins. In the last analysis, that is an assertion of equality with God. The people who heard our Lord make that claim asked the question one of another, "Who can forgive sins save God only?" (Mark ii. 7). It was quite an apt question, and such a question ought to have led to another question, the question which, indeed, was actually asked on another occasion by another group of people, "Who is this that forgiveth sins also?" (Luke vii. 49). Yes, Who is He? We cannot evade that question.

His claim to be the Judge of men is, in some respects, even more startling. As Liddon says, in his great book, *The Divinity of Our Lord*,<sup>2</sup> the claim made by Jesus is that He will "discharge an office involving such spiritual insight, such discernment of the thoughts and intents of the heart, of each one of the millions gathered at His feet, such awful, unshared supremacy in the moral world, that the imagination recoils in

<sup>1</sup> Second edition, p. 174.

<sup>2</sup> pp. 173, 174.

sheer agony from the task of seriously contemplating the assumption of these duties by any created intelligence”.

In a stupendous claim like that there is indeed something to make us think. As Dr. James Stalker has said, “Who would venture to pronounce a final verdict on the character of a brother man, or to measure out his deserts for a single day? But Jesus ascribed to Himself the ability to determine for eternity the value of the whole life, as made up not only of its obvious acts but of its most secret experiences and its most subtle motives”.<sup>1</sup> And Jesus said that He would do that in the case of all men of all races and generations. The question again becomes insistent, Who is He?

We often hear the assertion made that all the religion a man requires is to be found in the Sermon on the Mount, and that, if he would only confine himself to its simplicities and obey its teaching, he would have no need of the subtle theology of the Epistles. Sometimes, the purpose of such shallow talk is to get people to entertain the delusion that the Christ of the Sermon on the Mount is sufficient to meet all their needs, and that they do not need the Christ of the Cross. But the truth is that the Christ of the Sermon on the Mount, by His searching, unsparing ethic, reveals to us our sin more clearly than Mount Sinai can, and lays bare the secret evil of the heart in so terrifying a fashion that we are driven to “the green hill without the city wall”. There, on the gaunt, bare Tree of shame we may find more refreshing and satisfying fruit for our sin-sick souls than we can ever find on the Mount of the Beatitudes, where the lilies are blooming in the grass at our feet and the birds are wheeling overhead. It is only when we receive the forgiveness of sins, which comes to us in the Cross, and the power of the Holy Spirit, bestowed upon us by the Ascended and Glorified Redeemer, that we can even begin to obey the Sermon on the Mount.

That is by the way, however. Let us return to our more immediate subject.

It is often said that the Christ of the Sermon on the Mount is not the Christ of our subtle creeds, but the great religious Teacher, the peerless enunciator of moral principles, and that, it is alleged, is the Christ whom the modern world needs. Well, is that the Christ of the Sermon on the Mount?

<sup>1</sup> Stalker, *The Christology of Jesus*, p. 242.

The Sermon begins in a way that might seem to favour an advocate of a non-doctrinal Christianity, who says that he is not troubled by curious inquiries regarding the secret of the Person of Jesus. It begins with the Beatitudes, and the Beatitudes might appear, on a casual and superficial view of them, to be independent of any particular theory with regard to the one who spoke them. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven"—does that not remain true whatever we think of the person who uttered the words?

Is that not a hasty conclusion? Can we not in all the Beatitudes catch a strange note of authority which would sound exaggerated and suggestive of absurd pretensions in any other person than the Jesus of the Gospels? Who is this who declares with such extraordinary assurance what sort of people are to be in the Kingdom of God? Who is this who dares to announce rewards that only God can give?

We have not reached the end of the Beatitudes before we hear that tone of assurance and authority pealing forth with still more significant emphasis. "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake; for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you and persecute you and say all manner of evil against you falsely, for *My* sake. Rejoice and be exceeding glad; for great is your reward in heaven." That means that Jesus identifies Himself with the eternal and unchangeable righteousness of God.

The same note of challenging and uncompromising authority can be clearly heard in other words of Jesus. "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple" (Luke xiv. 26). "Whosoever shall be ashamed of Me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him also shall the Son of Man be ashamed, when He cometh in the glory of His Father with the holy angels" (Mark viii. 38). "Who," asks Dr. Machen, "can claim such an exclusive devotion as that—a devotion which shall take precedence of even the holiest of earthly ties, a devotion upon which a man's eternal destiny depends? God can, but can any mere man?"<sup>1</sup>

Near the end of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus silently ascends the Throne of God, as He says: "Many will say to *Me*

<sup>1</sup> Machen, *The Christian Faith in the Modern World*, p. 175

in that day, Lord, Lord . . . and then will *I* profess unto them, I never knew you; depart from Me, ye that work iniquity." There the claim is made by Jesus that, in the tremendous scene of the last judgment, at the court from which there is no appeal, He will pronounce the final decision which will determine the eternal destinies of men. More than that. As Dr. D. M. McIntyre said, He declares that "He is the heaven of the blessed, and absence from Him is hell".<sup>1</sup>

## II

All the words of Jesus which I have quoted are recorded in the Synoptic Gospels, and the tremendous claims to which I have referred are reported in these Gospels. Of course, it is almost a commonplace with a certain school of critics that the Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels is a far different person from the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel, who speaks and acts throughout as an unmistakably divine being, who calls Himself "the Son", the Son of God, in an absolute sense. But, that is an utterly unreal antithesis. The tremendous claims made by Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels find their justification in the fuller and clearer revelation given in the Fourth Gospel of who He really was and is. His Deity is explicitly stated in the Fourth Gospel, but, all through the other Gospels He speaks as only God has a right to speak. And, further, in the Synoptic Gospels, we have that great passage (Matt. xi. 27; Luke x. 22) which shows, that, according to the Synoptics, He sometimes spoke as He speaks so often in the Fourth Gospel.

The words are these: "All things have been delivered unto Me of My Father: and none knoweth the Son, save the Father; neither doth any know the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son willeth to reveal Him." These words have been described as an "aerolite from the Johannine heaven". Dr. P. T. Forsyth said that we have there "The Fourth Gospel in a nutshell". Denney declared that "there is nothing in the New Testament which carries us further than this; and nothing more is wanted to justify completely the attitude of Christian faith in Jesus."

Here we have not only the substance of the teaching that is so fully reported in the Gospel of John, but the very form of

<sup>1</sup> McIntyre, *Christ the Lord*, p. 71

it. "The Father," "The Son,"—how often these terms appear set over against each other in the Gospel of John, exactly as here.

Let us notice the setting of these words in Matthew. Our Lord had been upbraiding the cities wherein most of His mighty works had been done, because they had not repented. Some people, however, His disciples and others, had been led to true repentance, and, as "babes", as helpless sinners, utterly dependent on the grace of God, had entered into the Kingdom. In the presence of this division among men, He rests in the sovereign will and purpose of God. "I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that Thou didst hide these things from the wise and understanding, and didst reveal them unto babes." And then He proceeds with this great declaration, "the very point of which", as Warfield says,<sup>1</sup> "is to contrast His sovereign power with the neediness of those whom He calls to His Service".

This wonderful declaration contains four great assertions about our Lord and His work: (1) His universal authority; (2) the mystery of His person, known in its fullness only to the Father; (3) the unique relation of the Son to the Father, as involved in the Son's perfect knowledge of the Father; and (4) the knowledge of the Father, so far as it is possible to man, is to be had only through the Son.

In the assertion, "All things have been delivered unto Me of My Father", which constitutes a claim to sovereignty over all things, the past tense (the Greek aorist) points, in the opinion of many competent scholars, to a pre-temporal act, to a definite decree in the past eternity. Thus, an assertion like that implies the pre-existence of Christ, and a pre-temporal, or, in other words, His Eternal Sonship. This Eternal Sonship carries with it that mysterious, reciprocal relationship that is here described between the Father and the Son. This assertion, it is not too much to say, is identical in meaning with these words in the Fourth Gospel, "The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into His hand" (John iii. 35).

"None knoweth the Father save the Son." That is a present tense, suggesting not a past relation, but a continuous and unbroken one. "What our Lord asserts," says Warfield, "is thus not that He once was with the Father and knew His mind,

<sup>1</sup> *Hastings' Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, I, 304.

and is therefore fitted to mediate it as His representative on earth: it is that He, though on earth, still is with the Father and knows His mind—yea, and will know it unchangeably forever. The relations of time do not enter into the representation.”<sup>1</sup> A statement like that most emphatically means the deity of Jesus, for is it not most deeply true that only God can know God?

The fact of the deity of Jesus is even more clearly implied in the still more arresting words, “None knoweth the Son save the Father”. Here we surely have in Jesus a supernatural, divine consciousness; only if that is present is Jesus a mysterious being known only to God. To introduce, in the interpretation of these words, such ideas as that there are depths in human individuality that only God can fathom, is really to trifle with language. To suppose that, in a moment of emotional tension such as that moment must have been when these words were spoken, our Lord gave utterance merely to a psychological commonplace like that, is surely to soar to the very acme of absurdity.

There must be in His being a *metaphysical ground*, a unique relation to God. In the Fourth Gospel we have these words of Jesus: “Before Abraham was, I am” (John viii. 58). Of these words Liddon says that in them Jesus unveils a consciousness of Eternal Being. “He speaks as One to whom time has no meaning. He is the Eternal Now.” His words in Matthew xi. 27 have the same character. They are “a flash of revelation out of the depths of His Eternal Consciousness”.

Thus, as Warfield says,<sup>2</sup> “The Son is a fit and perfect mediator of the divine knowledge and grace because the Son and the Father are mutually intercommunicative. The depth of the Son’s being, we are told, can be fathomed by none but a divine knowledge, while the knowledge of the Son compasses all that God is”.

These unfathomable words of Jesus are immediately followed, in Matthew, by His great invitation, “Come unto Me, and I will give you rest.” These words are wonderful enough in themselves, but they shine with a new glory when they are brought into relation with what goes before. Are they not then discovered to mean this, that the deep root cause of man’s restlessness is just this, his ignorance of God, the tragic fact

<sup>1</sup> Warfield, *The Lord of Glory*, p. 83.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 84.



that he is out of touch with God by reason of his sin? "Thou hast made us, O God, for Thyself, and our souls are restless until they rest in Thee." And does Jesus not say this, that He gives rest by revealing to us the Father, and, a deeper thought still, by suffering for our sins, the Just for the unjust, *that He might bring us to God*" (1 Peter iii. 18)? Thus, as Bunyan's pilgrim sang at the Cross, "He hath given us rest by His sorrow, and life by His death".

Can a Redeemer like this ever fail, One who knows God thus, One who is Sovereign Lord over all things? Let us say to ourselves afresh this morning, our hearts filled with wonder, love and praise, "He is able to save unto the uttermost them that come unto God by Him, seeing He ever liveth to make intercession for them", and seeing He is Immanuel, God with us.

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