

The Deity of Christ

To complete the biblical teaching about Jesus Christ, we must affirm not only that he was fully human, but also that he was fully divine. Although the word does not explicitly occur in Scripture, the church has used the term *incarnation* to refer to the fact that Jesus was God in human flesh. The *incarnation* was the act of God the Son whereby he took to himself a human nature. The scriptural proof for the deity of Christ is very extensive in the New Testament. We shall examine it under several categories.¹⁶

1. Direct Scriptural Claims. In this section we examine direct statements of Scripture that Jesus is God or that he is divine.

a. The Word *God (Theos)* Used of Christ: Although the word θεός (G2536) “God,” is usually reserved in the New Testament for God the Father, nonetheless, there are several passages where it is also used to refer to Jesus Christ. In all of these passages the word “God” is used in the strong sense to refer to the one who is the Creator of heaven and earth, the ruler over all. These passages include John 1:1; 1:18 (in older and better manuscripts); 20:28; Romans 9:5; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 1:8 (quoting Ps. 45:6); and 2 Peter 1:1. As these passages have been discussed in some detail in the chapter on the Trinity, the discussion will not be repeated here. It is enough to note that there are at least these seven clear passages in the New Testament that explicitly refer to Jesus as God.

One Old Testament example of the name *God* applied to Christ is seen in a familiar messianic passage: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called “Wonderful Counselor, *Mighty God* . . .” ’ (Isa. 9:6).

b. The Word *Lord (Kyrios)* Used of Christ: Sometimes the word *Lord* (Gk. Κύριος, G3261) is used simply as a polite address to a superior, roughly equivalent to our word *sir* (see Matt. 13:27; 21:30; 27:63; John 4:11). Sometimes it can simply mean “master” of a servant or slave (Matt. 6:24; 21:40). Yet the same word is also used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament, which was commonly used at the time of Christ) as a translation for the Hebrew

יהוה, H3378, “Yahweh,” or (as it is frequently translated) “the LORD,” or “Jehovah.” The word Κύριος is used to translate the name of the Lord 6,814 times in the Greek Old Testament. Therefore, any Greek-speaking reader at the time of the New Testament who had any knowledge at all of the Greek Old Testament would have recognized that, in contexts where it was appropriate, the word “Lord” was the name of the one who was the Creator and Sustainer of heaven and earth, the omnipotent God.

Now there are many instances in the New Testament where “Lord” is used of Christ in what can only be understood as this strong Old Testament sense, “the Lord” who is Yahweh or God himself. This use of the word “Lord” is quite striking in the word of the angel to the shepherds of Bethlehem: “For to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ *the Lord*” (Luke 2:11). Though these words are familiar to us from frequent reading of the Christmas story, we should realize how surprising it would be to any first-century Jew to hear that someone born as a baby was the “Christ” (or “Messiah”), and, moreover, that this one who was the Messiah was also “the Lord—that is, the Lord God himself! The amazing force of the angel’s statement, which the shepherds could hardly believe, was to say, essentially, “Today in Bethlehem a baby

has been born who is your Savior and your Messiah, and who is also God himself.” It is not surprising that “all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them” (Luke 2:18).

When Mary comes to visit Elizabeth several months before Jesus is to be born, Elizabeth says, “Why is this granted me, that the mother of *my Lord* should come to me?” (Luke 1:43). Because Jesus was not even born, Elizabeth could not be using the word “Lord” to mean something like human “master.” She must rather be using it in the strong Old Testament sense, giving an amazing sense to the sentence: “Why is this granted me, that the mother of the Lord God himself should come to me?” Though this is a very strong statement, it is difficult to understand the word “Lord” in this context in any weaker sense.

We see another example when Matthew says that John the Baptist is the one who cries out in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of *the Lord* make his paths straight” (Matt. 3:3). In doing this John is quoting Isaiah 40:3, which speaks about the Lord God himself coming among his people. But the context applies this passage to John’s role of preparing the way for Jesus to come. The implication is that when Jesus comes, *the Lord himself* will come.

Jesus also identifies himself as the sovereign Lord of the Old Testament when he asks the Pharisees about Psalm 110:1, “The Lord said to *my Lord* Sit at my right hand, till I put your enemies under your feet” (Matt. 22:44). The force of this statement is that “God the Father said to God the Son [David’s Lord], “Sit at my right hand ...” ’ The Pharisees know he is talking about himself and identifying himself as one worthy of the Old Testament title Κύριος (G3261) “Lord.”

Such usage is seen frequently in the Epistles, where “the Lord” is a common name to refer to Christ. Paul says “there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and *one Lord* Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Cor. 8:6; cf. 12:3, and many other passages in the Pauline epistles).

A particularly clear passage is found in Hebrews 1, where the author quotes Psalm 102, which speaks about the work of the Lord in creation and applies it to Christ:

You, Lord, founded the earth in the beginning,
and the heavens are the work of your hands;
they will perish, but you remain;
they will all grow old like a garment,
like a mantle you will roll them up,
and they will be changed.
But you are the same,
and your years will never end. (Heb. 1:10–12)

Here Christ is explicitly spoken of as the eternal Lord of heaven and earth who created all things and will remain the same forever. Such strong usage of the term “Lord” to refer to Christ culminates in Revelation 19:16, where we see Christ returning as conquering King, and “On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, King of kings and *Lord of lords*.”

c. Other Strong Claims to Deity: In addition to the uses of the word *God* and *Lord* to refer to Christ, we have other passages that strongly claim deity for Christ. When Jesus told his Jewish opponents that Abraham had seen his (Christ’s) day, they challenged him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” (John 8:57). Here a sufficient response to prove Jesus’ eternity would have been, “Before Abraham was, I was.” But Jesus did not say this. Instead, he made a much more startling assertion: “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, *I am*”

(John 8:58). Jesus combined two assertions whose sequence seemed to make no sense: “Before something in the past happened [Abraham was], something in the present happened [I am].” The Jewish leaders recognized at once that he was not speaking in riddles or uttering nonsense: when he said, “I am,” he was repeating the very words God used when he identified himself to Moses as “*I AM WHO I AM*” (Ex. 3:14). Jesus was claiming for himself the title “*I AM*,” by which God designates himself as the eternal existing One, the God who is the source of his own existence and who always has been and always will be. When the Jews heard this unusual, emphatic, solemn statement, they knew that he was claiming to be God. “So they took up stones to throw at him; but Jesus hid himself, and went out of the temple” (John 8:59).

Another strong claim to deity is Jesus’ statement at the end of Revelation, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (Rev. 22:13). When this is combined with the statement of God the Father in Revelation 1:8, “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” it also constitutes a strong claim to equal deity with God the Father. Sovereign over all of history and all of creation, Jesus is the beginning and the end.

In John 1:1, John not only calls Jesus “God” but also refers to him as “the Word” (Gk. λόγος, G3364). John’s readers would have recognized in this term λόγος a dual reference, both to the powerful, creative Word of God in the Old Testament by which the heavens and earth were created (Ps. 33:6) and to the organizing or unifying principle of the universe, the thing that held it together and allowed it to make sense, in Greek thinking. John is identifying Jesus with both of these ideas and saying that he is not only the powerful, creative Word of God and the organizing or unifying force in the universe, but also that he became man: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father” (John 1:14). Here is another strong claim to deity coupled with an explicit statement that Jesus also became man and moved among us as a man.

Further evidence of claims to deity can be found in the fact that Jesus calls himself “*the Son of man*.” This title is used eighty-four times in the four gospels but only by Jesus and only to speak of himself (note, e.g., Matt. 16:13 with Luke 9:18). In the rest of the New Testament, the phrase “*the Son of man*” (with the definite article “the”) is used only once, in Acts 7:56, where Stephen refers to Christ as the Son of Man. This unique term has as its background the vision in Daniel 7 where Daniel saw one like a “Son of Man” who “came to the Ancient of Days” and was given “dominion and glory and kingdom, *that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away*” (Dan. 7:13–14). It is striking that this “son of man” came “with the clouds of heaven” (Dan. 7:13). This passage clearly speaks of someone who had heavenly origin and who was given *eternal rule* over the *whole world*. The high priests did not miss the point of this passage when Jesus said, “Hereafter you will see the Son of man *seated at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven*” (Matt. 26:64). The reference to Daniel 7:13–14 was unmistakable, and the high priest and his council knew that Jesus was claiming to be the eternal world ruler of heavenly origin spoken of in Daniel’s vision. Immediately they said, “He has uttered blasphemy ... He deserves death” (Matt. 26:65–66). Here Jesus finally made explicit the strong claims to eternal world rule that were earlier hinted at in his frequent use of the title “the Son of man” to apply to himself.

Though the title “Son of God” can sometimes be used simply to refer to Israel (Matt. 2:15), or to man as created by God (Luke 2:38), or to redeemed man generally (Rom. 8:14, 19, 23), there are nevertheless instances in which the phrase “Son of God” refers to Jesus as the heavenly, eternal Son who is equal to God himself (see Matt. 11:25–30; 17:5; 1 Cor. 15:28; Heb. 1:1–3, 5, 8). This is especially true in John’s gospel where Jesus is seen as a unique Son from the Father

(John 1:14, 18, 34, 49) who fully reveals the Father (John 8:19; 14:9). As Son he is so great that we can trust in him for eternal life (something that could be said of no created being: John 3:16, 36; 20:31). He is also the one who has all authority from the Father to give life, pronounce eternal judgment, and rule over all (John 3:36; 5:20–22, 25; 10:17; 16:15). As Son he has been sent by the Father, and therefore he existed before he came into the world (John 3:17; 5:23; 10:36).

The first three verses of Hebrews are emphatic in saying that the Son is the one whom God “appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world” (Heb. 1:2). This Son, says the writer, “reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp [lit., is the “exact duplicate,” Gk. χαρακτήρ, G5917] of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power” (Heb. 1:3). Jesus is the exact duplicate of the “nature” (or being, Gk. ὑπόστασις, G5712) of God, making him exactly equal to God in every attribute. Moreover, he continually upholds the universe “by his word of power,” something that only God could do.

These passages combine to indicate that the title “Son of God” *when applied to Christ* strongly affirms his deity as the eternal Son in the Trinity, one equal to God the Father in all his attributes.

2. Evidence That Jesus Possessed Attributes of Deity. In addition to the specific affirmations of Jesus’ deity seen in the many passages quoted above, we see many examples of actions in Jesus’ lifetime that point to his divine character.

Jesus demonstrated his *omnipotence* when he stilled the storm at sea with a word (Matt. 8:26–27), multiplied the loaves and fish (Matt. 14:19), and changed water into wine (John 2:1–11). Some might object that these miracles just showed the power of the Holy Spirit working through him, just as the Holy Spirit could work through any other human being, and therefore these do not demonstrate Jesus’ own deity. But the contextual explanations of these events often point not to what they demonstrate about the power of the Holy Spirit but to what they demonstrate about Jesus himself. For instance, after Jesus turned water into wine, John tells us, “This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and *manifested his glory*; and his disciples believed in him” (John 2:11). It was not the glory of the Holy Spirit that was manifested but the glory of Jesus himself, as his divine power worked to change water into wine. Similarly, after Jesus stilled the storm on the Sea of Galilee, the disciples did not say, “How great is the power of the Holy Spirit working through this prophet,” but rather, “What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea *obey him?*” (Matt. 8:27). It was the authority of Jesus himself to which the winds and the waves were subject, and this could only be the authority of God who rules over the seas and has power to still the waves (cf. Ps. 65:7; 89:9; 107:29).

Jesus asserts his *eternity* when he says, “Before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58, see discussion above), or, “I am the Alpha and the Omega” (Rev. 22:13).

The *omniscience* of Jesus is demonstrated in his knowing people’s thoughts (Mark 2:8) and seeing Nathaniel under the fig tree from far away (John 1:48), and knowing “from the first who those were that did not believe, and who it was that would betray him” (John 6:64). Of course, the revelation of individual, specific events or facts is something that God could give to anyone who had a gift of prophecy in the Old or New Testaments. But Jesus’ knowledge was much more extensive than that. He knew “who those were that did not believe,” thus implying that he knew the belief or unbelief that was in the hearts of all men. In fact, John says explicitly that Jesus “*knew all men* and needed no one to bear witness of man” (John 2:25). The disciples could later say to him, “Now we know that *you know all things*” (John 16:30). These statements say much

more than what could be said of any great prophet or apostle of the Old Testament or New Testament, for they imply omniscience on the part of Jesus.

Finally, after his resurrection, when Jesus asked Peter if he loved him, Peter answered, “Lord, *you know everything*; you know that I love you” (John 21:17). Here Peter is saying much more than that Jesus knows his heart and knows that he loves him. He is rather making a general statement (“You know everything”) and from it he is drawing a specific conclusion (“You know that I love you”). Peter is confident that Jesus knows what is in the heart of every person, and therefore he is sure that Jesus knows his own heart.

The divine attribute of *omnipresence* is not directly affirmed to be true of Jesus during his earthly ministry. However, while looking forward to the time that the church would be established, Jesus could say, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, *there am I* in the midst of them” (Matt. 18:20). Moreover, before he left the earth, he told his disciples, “I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Matt. 28:20).

That Jesus possessed divine *sovereignty* a kind of authority possessed by God alone, is seen in the fact that he could forgive sins (Mark 2:5–7). Unlike the Old Testament prophets who declared, “Thus says the LORD,” he could preface his statements with the phrase, “But *I say to you*” (Matt. 5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44)—an amazing claim to his own authority. He could speak with the authority of God himself because he was himself fully God. He had “all things” delivered into his hands by the Father and the authority to reveal the Father to whomever he chose (Matt. 11:25–27). Such is his authority that the future eternal state of everyone in the universe depends on whether they believe in him or reject him (John 3:36).

Jesus also possessed the divine attribute of *immortality* the inability to die. We see this indicated near the beginning of John’s gospel, when Jesus says to the Jews, “Destroy this temple, and in three days *I will raise it up*” (John 2:19). John explains that he was not speaking about the temple made with stones in Jerusalem, “but he spoke of the temple of *his body*. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken” (John 2:21–22). We must insist of course that Jesus really did die: this very passage speaks of the time when “he was raised from the dead.” But it is also significant that Jesus predicts that he will have an active role in his own resurrection: “*I will raise it up.*” Although other Scripture passages tell us that God the Father was active in raising Christ from the dead, here he says that he himself will be active in his resurrection.

Jesus claims the power to lay down his life and take it up again in another passage in John’s gospel: “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again; this charge I have received from my Father” (John 10:17–18). Here Jesus speaks of a power no other human being has had—the power to lay down his own life *and* the power to take it up again. Once again, this is an indication that Jesus possessed the divine attribute of immortality. Similarly, the author of Hebrews says that Jesus “has become a priest, not according to a legal requirement concerning bodily descent but by the power of *an indestructible life*” (Heb. 7:16). (The fact that immortality is a unique characteristic of God alone is seen in 1 Tim. 6:16, which speaks of God as the one “who alone has immortality.”)

Another clear attestation to the deity of Christ is the fact that he is counted *worthy to be worshiped* something that is true of no other creature, including angels (see Rev. 19:10), but only God alone. Yet Scripture says of Christ that “God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven

and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:9–11). Similarly, God commands the angels to worship Christ, for we read, “When he brings the first-born into the world, he says, “Let all God’s angels worship him” ’ (Heb. 1:6).

John is allowed a glimpse of the worship that occurs in heaven, for he sees thousands and thousands of angels and heavenly creatures around God’s throne saying, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” (Rev. 5:12). Then he hears “*every creature* in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all therein, saying, “To him who sits upon the throne *and to the Lamb* be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever!” ’ (Rev. 5:13). Christ is here called “the Lamb who was slain,” and he is accorded the universal worship offered to God the Father, thus clearly demonstrating his equality in deity.

3. Did Jesus Give Up Some of His Divine Attributes While on Earth? (The Kenosis Theory). Paul writes to the Philippians,

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but *emptied himself* taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. (Phil. 2:5–7)

Beginning with this text, several theologians in Germany (from about 1860–1880) and in England (from about 1890–1910) advocated a view of the incarnation that had not been advocated before in the history of the church. This new view was called the “kenosis theory,” and the overall position it represented was called “kenotic theology.” The *kenosis theory* holds that Christ gave up some of his divine attributes while he was on earth as a man. (The word *κενόσις* is taken from the Greek verb *κενόω*, G3033, which generally means “to empty,” and is translated “emptied himself” in Phil. 2:7.) According to the theory Christ “emptied himself” of some of his divine attributes, such as omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence, while he was on earth as a man. This was viewed as a voluntary self-limitation on Christ’s part, which he carried out in order to fulfill his work of redemption.

But does Philippians 2:7 teach that Christ emptied himself of some of his divine attributes, and does the rest of the New Testament confirm this? The evidence of Scripture points to a negative answer to both questions. We must first realize that no recognized teacher in the first 1,800 years of church history, including those who were native speakers of Greek, thought that “emptied himself” in Philippians 2:7 meant that the Son of God gave up some of his divine attributes. Second, we must recognize that the text does not say that Christ “emptied himself of some powers” or “emptied himself of divine attributes” or anything like that. Third, the text *does* describe what Jesus did in this “emptying”: he did not do it by giving up any of his attributes but rather by “taking the form of a servant,” that is, by coming to live as a man, and “being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8). Thus, the context itself interprets this “emptying” as equivalent to “humbling himself” and taking on a lowly status and position. Thus, the NIV, instead of translating the phrase, “He *emptied* himself,” translates it, “but *made himself nothing*” (Phil. 2:7 NIV). The emptying includes change of role and status, not essential attributes or nature.

A fourth reason for this interpretation is seen in Paul’s purpose in this context. His purpose has been to persuade the Philippians that they should “do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves” (Phil. 2:3), and he continues by telling them,

“Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:4). To persuade them to be humble and to put the interests of others first, he then holds up the example of Christ: “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant ...” (Phil. 2:5–7).

Now in holding up Christ as an example, he wants the Philippians to imitate Christ. But certainly he is not asking the Philippian Christians to “give up” or “lay aside” any of their essential attributes or abilities! He is not asking them to “give up” their intelligence or strength or skill and become a diminished version of what they were. Rather, he is asking them to put the interests of others first: “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:4). And because that is his goal, it fits the context to understand that he is using Christ as the supreme example of one who did just that: he put the interests of others first and was willing to give up some of the privilege and status that was his as God.

Therefore, the best understanding of this passage is that it talks about Jesus giving up the *status* and *privilege* that was his in heaven: he “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped” (or “clung to for his own advantage”), but “emptied himself” or “humbled himself” “for our sake, and came to live as a man. Jesus speaks elsewhere of the “glory” he had with the Father “before the world was made” (John 17:5), a glory that he had given up and was going to receive again when he returned to heaven. And Paul could speak of Christ who, “though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor” (2 Cor. 8:9), once again speaking of the privilege and honor that he deserved but temporarily gave up for us.

The fifth and final reason why the “kenosis” view of Philippians 2:7 must be rejected is the larger context of the teaching of the New Testament and the doctrinal teaching of the entire Bible. If it were true that such a momentous event as this happened, that the eternal Son of God ceased for a time to have all the attributes of God—ceased, for a time, to be omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent, for example—then we would expect that such an incredible event would be taught clearly and repeatedly in the New Testament, not found in the very doubtful interpretation of one word in one epistle. But we find the opposite of that: we do not find it stated anywhere else that the Son of God ceased to have some of the attributes of God that he had possessed from eternity. In fact, if the kenosis theory were true (and this is a foundational objection against it), then we could no longer affirm Jesus was fully God while he was here on earth. The kenosis theory ultimately denies the full deity of Jesus Christ and makes him something less than fully God. S.M. Smith admits, “All forms of classical orthodoxy either explicitly reject or reject in principle kenotic theology.”²⁹

It is important to realize that the major force persuading people to accept kenotic theory was not that they had discovered a better understanding of Philippians 2:7 or any other passage of the New Testament, but rather the increasing discomfort people were feeling with the formulations of the doctrine of Christ in historic, classical orthodoxy. It just seemed too incredible for modern rational and “scientific” people to believe that Jesus Christ could be truly human and fully, absolutely God at the same time. The kenosis theory began to sound more and more like an acceptable way to say that (in some sense) Jesus was God, but a kind of God who had for a time given up some of his Godlike qualities, those that were most difficult for people to accept in the modern world.

4. Conclusion: Christ Is Fully Divine. The New Testament, in hundreds of explicit verses that call Jesus “God” and “Lord” and use a number of other titles of deity to refer to him, and in many passages that attribute actions or words to him that could only be true of God himself, affirms again and again the full, absolute deity of Jesus Christ. “In him *all the fulness of God* was pleased to dwell” (Col. 1:19), and “in him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily” (Col. 2:9). In an earlier section we argued that Jesus is truly and fully man. Now we conclude that he is truly and fully God as well. His name is rightly called “Emmanuel,” that is, “God with us” (Matt. 1:23).

5. Is The Doctrine of the Incarnation “Unintelligible” Today? Throughout history there have been objections to the New Testament teaching on the full deity of Christ. One recent attack on this doctrine deserves mention here because it created a large controversy, since the contributors to the volume were all recognized church leaders in England. The book was called *The Myth of God Incarnate* edited by John Hick (London: SCM, 1977). The title gives away the thesis of the book: the idea that Jesus was “God incarnate” or “God come in the flesh” is a “myth—a helpful story, perhaps, for the faith of earlier generations, but not one that can really be believed by us today.

The argument of the book begins with some foundational assumptions: (1) the Bible does not have absolute divine authority for us today (p. i), and (2) Christianity, like all human life and thought, is evolving and changing over time (p. ii). The basic claims of the book are laid out in the first two chapters. In chapter 1, Maurice Wiles argues that it is possible to have Christianity without the doctrine of the incarnation. The church has given up earlier doctrines, such as the “real presence” of Christ in the Lord’s Supper, the inerrancy of Scripture, and the virgin birth; therefore, it is possible to give up the traditional doctrine of the incarnation and still keep the Christian faith as well (pp. 2–3). Moreover, the doctrine of the incarnation is not directly presented in Scripture but originated in a setting where belief in the supernatural was credible; nevertheless, it has never been a coherent or intelligible doctrine through the history of the church (pp. 3–5).

Regarding the New Testament teaching, Francis Young, in chapter 2, argues that the New Testament contains the writings of many diverse witnesses who tell of their own understanding of Christ, but that no single or unified view of Christ can be gained from the entire New Testament; the early church’s understanding of the person of Christ was developing in various directions over time. Young concludes that the situation is similar today: within the Christian church many diverse *personal responses* to the story of Jesus Christ are acceptable for us as well, and that would certainly include the response that sees Christ as a man in whom God was uniquely at work but not by any means a man who was also fully God.

From the standpoint of evangelical theology, it is significant to note that this forthright rejection of Jesus’ deity could only be advocated upon a prior assumption that the New Testament is not to be accepted as an absolute divine authority for us, truthful at every point. This question of authority is, in many cases, the great dividing line in conclusions about the person of Christ. Second, much of the criticism of the doctrine of the incarnation focused on the claim that it was not “coherent” or “intelligible.” Yet at root this is simply an indication that the authors are unwilling to accept anything that does not appear to fit in with their “scientific” worldview in which the natural universe is a closed system not open to such divine intrusions as miracles and the incarnation. The assertion that “Jesus was fully God and fully man in one person,” though not a contradiction, is a paradox that we cannot fully understand in this age and

perhaps not for all eternity, but this does not give us the right to label it “incoherent” or “unintelligible.” The doctrine of the incarnation as understood by the church throughout history has indeed been coherent and intelligible, though no one maintains that it provides us with an exhaustive explanation of how Jesus is both fully God and fully man. Our proper response is not to reject the clear and central teaching of Scripture about the incarnation, but simply to recognize that it will remain a paradox, that this is all that God has chosen to reveal to us about it, and that it is true. If we are to submit ourselves to God and to his words in Scripture, then we must believe it.

6. Why Was Jesus’ Deity Necessary? In the previous section we listed several reasons why it was necessary for Jesus to be fully man in order to earn our redemption. Here it is appropriate to recognize that it is crucially important to insist on the full deity of Christ as well, not only because it is clearly taught in Scripture, but also because (1) only someone who is infinite God could bear the full penalty for all the sins of all those who would believe in him—any finite creature would have been incapable of bearing that penalty; (2) salvation is from the Lord (Jonah 2:9 NASB), and the whole message of Scripture is designed to show that no human being, no creature, could ever save man—only God himself could; and (3) only someone who was truly and fully God could be the one mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5), both to bring us back to God and also to reveal God most fully to us (John 14:9).

Thus, if Jesus is not fully God, we have no salvation and ultimately no Christianity. It is no accident that throughout history those groups that have given up belief in the full deity of Christ have not remained long within the Christian faith but have soon drifted toward the kind of religion represented by Unitarianism in the United States and elsewhere. “No one who denies the Son has the Father” (1 John 2:23). “Any one who goes ahead and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God; he who abides in the doctrine has both the Father and the Son” (2 John 9).¹

¹ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology : An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 1994), 543-54.