

DID JESUS CHRIST CLAIM TO BE GOD?

WE may imitate the method of our master St. Thomas by setting down the opinion from which we differ. Dean Rashdall of Carlisle has given us a full and perhaps final expression of that opinion in his paper read at the Cambridge Conference of Modern Churchmen under the title "Christ as Logos and Son of God." He writes :

"Jesus did not claim divinity for Himself. He may have called Himself, or more probably allowed Himself to be called, the Messiah or Son of God. But never in any critically well-attested sayings is there anything which suggests that His conscious relation to God was other than that of a man towards God. . . . The speeches of the Fourth Gospel where they go beyond the Synoptic conception cannot be regarded as history, valuable as they may be for theology. The doctrine of our Lord's divinity must be taken to express the Church's conception of what Jesus is or should be to His followers and to the world, not His own theory about Himself.

"*Note 2.* . . . If we accept the Synoptic discourses as substantially correct (though not, of course, in every detail, for there are considerable discrepancies between them), it is impossible to regard the Johannine discourses as equally accurate reports ; and even in this Gospel few sentences (when taken apart from the Preface, which does not pretend to represent the words of Jesus, and other comments of the Evangelist) imply actual Godhead in the sense of post-Nicene theology. . . . The claim to be the Son of God does not necessarily imply *Godhead*" (*The Modern Churchman*, Sept., pp. 278, 279)

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1. We wish to set on record our conviction of the spirit of reverence which seems present in this and the associated pronouncements on the divinity of Jesus Christ. Whilst we shall be at pains to show the untruth and therefore the objective heresy of these statements, we willingly admit the reverent spirit of the men to whom the statements are the expression of truth. Some of those who admit the full Catholic doctrine of the divinity of Jesus can see only blasphemy in the doctrine that He who is true God is only a man. But these defenders of the truth should be able to see that from an opposite point of view to call Jesus Christ God if He is only a man is almost a greater blasphemy.

2. "Jesus did not claim divinity for Himself." As far as we can judge, Dean Rashdall's proof of this statement is this: "The Four Gospels (and indeed the rest of the books of the New Testament) do not record any clear claim to divinity made by Jesus Christ." This proof used by Dean Rashdall rests on the principle of "The Bible only." Those who accept the principle that only the Bible is the rule of faith would find it impossible to deny that Jesus Christ did not claim divinity for Himself if that claim was not clearly expressed in the New Testament. But we need not remind our readers that this principle has never been accepted by the Catholic Church. We should then be beyond the reach of this Modernist argument, even if, in fact, the New Testament nowhere recorded Jesus Christ's claim to divinity.

3. But we do not agree that the Gospels contain no record of this claim. We hold that the claim to be "the Son of God" is the claim to divinity.

I. It must not be forgotten that the doctrine of the divinity of Jesus has been defined in terms of "the

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Son of God.” Modern exegetes have been so concerned with the Johannine Logos that they have looked upon it as the highest expression of the divinity of Jesus! But this is far from the theological and historical fact. Theologically speaking, the word Logos does not imply personality, which Son implies. It might mean—as, indeed, in all non-Christian works it did mean—a mere divine activity or concept with no more personality than the thought of an intelligence. But “Son of God” unmistakably implied personality; so that, theologically speaking, “Son of God” was the highest expression of the divinity of Jesus.

Moreover, historically speaking, Son of God was the more important term. When the Council of Nicea defined the divinity of Jesus it was, not by saying that the Λογος was ὁμοουσιος, but that the Υιος was ὁμοουσιος.

It is therefore antecedently possible, if not probable, that the claim to be not A Son of God, but THE only begotten Son of God, was a claim to be divine.

II. Indeed, if Jesus Christ was, what the Catholic Church holds that He is, the consubstantial Son of God, it is difficult to see how a better formula for expressing His claim to Sonship could have been found. Criticism is surely at the crossways if its main objection to a doctrine is that this doctrine has been expressed in the most accurate mode of expression. If Jesus Christ is the Son of God—if this formula is the highest expression of His Godhead, if He claimed to be the Son of God—it is hardly an argument against His claim that He formulated it with accuracy.

III. But it is urged that the formula “the Son of God” was taken by the Jews to mean “the Messiah.”

a. Dean Rashdall uses a more careful phrase: “The claim to be the Son of God does not *necessarily* [italics:”

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Rashdall] imply Godhead.” But the claim to be the Son of God may *possibly* imply Godhead. The intention of the Speaker must be determined.

b. If it is urged that (some of) the Jews understood the phrase to mean “the Messiah,” we are at a loss to know what this argument proves. We are far from certain that the Jews contemporary with Jesus called the Messiah THE Son of God. But even if they did identify the Son of God and the Messiah, this would not prove that Jesus made the same identification. To say that by the phrase “Son of God” some Jews meant the Messiah, and *therefore* Jesus must have meant the Messiah, is a plain *non sequitur*. Dean Rashdall has the scholarly instinct to avoid this unsound reasoning by the cautious phrase “does not necessarily” (but does possibly) “imply Godhead.”

c. It was almost a law with Jesus Christ to lead His hearers on from a true but imperfect meaning to a truer and more perfect meaning. As He was the Messiah, it was not an error to think either that He was what He claimed to be or that He claimed to be what He was. Error would creep in only when men denied that He was even the Messiah or agreed that He was the Messiah, but denied that He was the Son of God. Times and moments, habits of thought and dispositions of will, entered so largely and so professedly into our Blessed Lord’s manifestation of the truth that in leading the Jews from the true but incomplete idea of His Messiahship to the true and complete idea of His divine Sonship He was but carrying out one of His own formulated laws.

IV. The claim to divinity is seen by us at its clearest in the Gospel of St. John. This witness of St. John is so valuable and noteworthy that we must confine it to certain heads.

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a. It is agreed that the first eighteen verses of St. John's Gospel (the Preface : Rashdall) are a claim to divinity. We agree that they are a claim put forward, not by Jesus, but by St. John.

b. We have elsewhere (BLACKFRIARS, Nov., 1921) pointed out that the $\Lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$ is not the thesis of the Fourth Gospel. That thesis is the $\Upsilon\iota\omicron\varsigma$. The word $\Lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$ is used only *four* times (verse 1, thrice ; verse 14, once). The word $\Upsilon\iota\omicron\varsigma$ is used some twenty-four times in twelve chapters. Moreover, St. John uses the word "Father" with an insistence which gives new force to the word "Son."

Son is so emphatically the thesis of the Fourth Gospel that St. John says explicitly : "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ,* the Son of God"† (John xx. 31).

The various attributes which, taken collectively, show the Godhead are everywhere outside the Preface predicated, not of the Word, but of the Son.

a. Jesus is *pre-existent*, not as Word, but as Son : "No man hath ascended into heaven, but He that hath descended from heaven, the Son of Man" (iii. 13). "And now glorify Thou Me, O Father, with Thyself with the glory which I had before the world was, with Thee" (xvii. 5).

β . Jesus is *omnipotent*, not as Word, but as Son : "The Father loveth the Son ; and He hath given all things into His hands. He that believeth in the Son hath everlasting life" (iii. 35, 36).

γ . Jesus sends the Spirit of Truth, i.e. He is *omni-scient*, not as Word (though omniscience would seem natural to the Word), but as Son : "I will ask the

* The Messiah is *the* Son of God.

† The Messias.

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Father and He shall give you another Paraclete . . . the Spirit of Truth ” xiv. 16, 17).

δ. Jesus, therefore, is *equal in honour* with the Father, not as Word, but as Son : “ That all men may honour the Son, as they honour the Father ” (v. 23).

ε. Jesus is therefore *equal in nature* with the Father, not as Word, but as Son : “ Hereupon therefore the Jews sought the more to kill Him, because He did not only break the Sabbath, but also said God was His Father, making Himself equal to God ” (v. 18). “ I and the Father are One ” (x. 30).

ξ. The Jews condemned Jesus, not as claiming to be the Word, but the Son : “ According to the law He ought to die, because He made Himself the Son of God ” (xix. 7).

η. Belief in our Lord is belief that He is the Son : “ Dost thou believe in the Son of God ? ” (ix. 35). “ He that believeth not is already judged, because he believeth not in the name of the only begotten Son of God ” (iii. 16, 18).

A. It cannot be too often insisted on that the Preface in which alone occurs the title *Λογος*, seems to be an introduction to the Greek mind, which was likely to interpret the title “ Son ” in a physical and polytheistic sense. “ Son of God ” was then, as it is now, the highest expression of the Godhead of Jesus. By identifying Son of God = Word, St. John was accommodating the Greek mind at the risk of scandalizing the Hebrew mind. To the Hebrews, the phrase “ Word of God ” would convey no idea of personality. Now, the full doctrine of the Trinity and the Incarnation is reached only when it is made clear that Jesus was a *Person within the Godhead*. The title “ Word ” rather obscured than declared this idea. The idea of “ the Word ” needs the idea of “ the Son ” in order

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to be complete. The idea of "the Son" needs the idea of "the Word," not in order to be complete, but in order to be adapted to the Greek polytheistic mind.

B. An examination of the texts we have grouped above will make it clear that, apart from the first fourteen verses, the Gospel of St. John shows Jesus Christ claiming the attributes, the nature, the honour, the human worship of faith claimed by God. Some of these attributes He claimed to have because He had received them. This, again, is but the accurate doctrine of the Catholic Church. As *Man*, Jesus shared finitely in the attributes of omniscience and omnipotence. He had this share because He had received it. But even as "true God of true God" He had these divine attributes, not in part, but in whole, because He had received them. Catholic faith teaches us that the Son of God is God of God. All that He has, He has of the Father. So that these claims which seem to suggest God's gift to a Man may also mean accurately God the Father's giving of the divine nature and attributes to the Son.

C. The witness of St. John is not a new claim, but a reinforcement of the existing claim. The Synoptic Gospels had made "the Son of God" the centre of their Christology. To recognize that divine Sonship was the condition of the spokesman of the Apostles, St. Peter, receiving the keys of the kingdom. To have claimed and proclaimed that divine Sonship was the official legal death-charge on which the Jewish tribunal decreed His death.

No doubt, in the first days of Christianity, even as now, there were men who did not feel that this claim to divine Sonship was a claim to divinity. Before the end of the first century St. John had written a plain reaffirmation of that claim. But it is to be noted that he does not bring in a new claim, or state the old

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claim in new words. His thesis is the Synoptic thesis ; and the thesis of St. John and the Synoptists is the thesis of the Catholic Church : " Jesus is and claimed to be the consubstantial Son of God."

This reaffirmation of the old Synoptic thesis is all the more striking because in so many other ways St. John's Gospel is dedicated to bringing in the new, rather than reinforcing the old. To him alone we owe the clear enunciation of the fact that the Son as such is not sent into the world by the Holy Ghost ; but that the Holy Ghost, the Spirit of the Son as such, is sent into the world by the Son (cf. sup.). Again, it is to St. John we owe the doctrine of the death of Jesus being the sacrificial death of " the Lamb of God." To St. John we owe the fact of a series of Calls to the Apostles and of the singling out of St. Peter. To St. John we owe the unique miracle of transubstantiation and the unique discussion on the Eucharist of Christ's flesh and blood. St. John, therefore, was capable of giving something new by recalling doctrines which the Synoptists had not recorded. All this becomes of great significance when we find that in giving, as he admittedly intended to give, Jesus Christ's claim to divinity he gives it in the old accepted terms of the Synoptic thesis : THE SON OF GOD.

Here we cannot urge, with some Modern Churchmen, that St. John so differs from the Synoptists that his narrative is untrustworthy. The fact is that St. John here agrees with the Synoptists, so that their testimony and his reach the highest point of trustworthiness.

To sum up. It is agreed that the Fourth Gospel, whether written by St. John or by some unnamed and unknown leader of the early Church, was written in order to claim divinity for Jesus Christ.

This claim to divinity is admittedly in the first fourteen verses of St. John's Gospel, which speaks of the

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Λογος or Word of God. But these fourteen verses do not introduce any new and higher doctrine about Jesus. They merely teach the Greek polytheistic mind that "the Son of God" has a spiritual and not a carnal begetting. To the mind of the primitive Church the claim to be "the Son of God," common to all four Gospels, is the same as the claim to be the Word of God—or is a claim to divinity.

The Modernist's Jesus Christ is not an ignoble figure. He is a Person of such nobility as to win the admiration and gratitude of mankind. But He is not the Christ of the Christian Church. The old primitive Church as voiced by the Fourth Gospel saw in their Redeemer's claim to be the Son of God His claim to divinity. Modern Churchmen see otherwise. But we shall find it impossible to accept the Modernist view, however good, rather than the older view, "for the old is better."

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