

Chapter #12

The Deity of Christ Defended by Scripture

In Chapters seven and eight we proved the inspiration of the Bible using both internal and external evidence. It is obvious that the Bible is not just an ordinary book. It has endured through thousands of years and has had a greater impact on human kind than any other book or event. People have died for the truth within its pages. And the scientific and medical information found within those pages is equally incredible. Long before the scientific discovery of germs and methods of sanitation, God's people were practicing methods of hygiene that would protect them from the diseases that infected their neighboring nations. The Bible is also full of prophecies about nations and cities that have come true with pinpoint accuracy. By far, though, the most profound prophecies foretold the coming Christ, and they were perfectly fulfilled in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Our conclusion at the end of those chapters was that any thinking man should at least consider the claims of the Bible.

In sharing the gospel with skeptics, our primary goal is to help them to objectively consider the writings of the Bible. By showing it to be historically reliable and uniquely inspired, we hope they will read it to learn more. But the problem we encountered was that, even though they might acknowledge the Bible contained valid historical information, it couldn't be proven that the Bible's *interpretation* of those historical events was valid. So we set out to find an accepted way of determining the truth of the Christian religion. By using the method of the analytic philosophers, we found a synthetic statement (the resurrection of Christ) on which our entire religion rests and proved it true by empirical evidence. There can be no doubt that Jesus Christ actually rose from the dead. No other explanation can account for all the facts. The person who honestly and openly reviews all the evidence can come to no other conclusion. It is only the predisposition against the supernatural that keeps him from believing what is obvious.

Jesus had foretold His death and resurrection and pointed to the resurrection as the crowning proof of the truth of what He taught. By proving the reality of the resurrection, we prove that Jesus was more than mere man, and His teachings were more than simply the ideas of a religious man about God. His words are truth. His interpretation of the historical events can be trusted. Shouldn't the skeptic at least consider the words of a man who raised Himself from the dead?

What did Jesus claim about Himself?

In order to understand the full impact of Jesus's statements in the Gospels, we need to look back at the book of Exodus where God first revealed Himself to Moses. [If you are sharing this concept with an atheist, he or she doesn't have to believe in God for you to present this story. What matters is what the Israelites believed about God and what Jesus claimed in light of Jewish understanding.] In Exodus chapter three, Moses encounters a burning bush that is not consumed, and a voice speaks to him from it. The voice claims to be God calling Moses to deliver His chosen people from bondage in Egypt. When Moses asks God's name, he receives this reply:

Exodus 3:14-15 *God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation.*

The name God used meant *ōI am who I am,ō or *ōI will be who I will be.ō* The construction of the word was such that it could be either or both at the same time. The term was an expression of God's timelessness. He*

is the God who was, is and will be. The same idea is conveyed in the expression used elsewhere that God is the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end. He is the One who is eternally existent. This name became the covenant name for God and was considered so sacred and holy that it was never spoken aloud. It has come down to us as four consonants, YHWH, known to scholars as the *ōtetragrammaton*. Understandably, the pronunciation has been lost. In order to remind the priests not to vocalize the name of God while reading the texts of God's Law, scribes wrote the vowels for the word Lord (*adonai*) just above it. When reading, the priest would see the vowels and substitute *ōLordō* for YHWH. Thousands of years later when translators came across this peculiar word, not knowing the Jewish custom, they simply inserted the vowels between the consonants, forming the word *ōJehovah*. Most scholars today, however, believe the word was probably pronounced Yahweh. But the name is not as significant as the reverence that was attached to it. To utter God's sacred name aloud was unthinkable. To claim that name for oneself would be blasphemy.

It is important to note the Jewish understanding of God that was revealed in the Old Testament. He wasn't just one God among many. He was the one and only God:

Isaiah 43:10-11 *“You are my witnesses,” declares the LORD, “and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me. I, even I, am the LORD, and apart from me there is no savior.*

The phrase *ōI am heō* is the *ōI AMō* of Exodus 3:14. It was Yahweh or Jehovah, the covenant name for God. In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament written around 250 B.C.), this name for God is rendered *ōego eimi,ōōI am.ō* God Himself declared that no god ever had or ever would be formed. He was the only God. This is the concept that set the Jews apart from every other religion at the time: they were monotheistic.

Jesus and His disciples were also Jews. They grew up with this fierce monotheism and reverence for the name of God. But notice some of Jesus's claims. He used the exact word for God, *ōI AM,ō* in reference to Himself.

1. Jesus claimed the name of God for Himself.

John 8:24 *I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be [literally *ōego eimi,ōōI AMō*], you will indeed die in your sins.”*

John 8:28 *So Jesus said, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am the one I claim to be [*ōego eimiō*] and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me.*

John 8:58 *“I tell you the truth,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!” [*ego eimi*]*

John 13:19 *“I am telling you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe that I am He.” [*ego eimi*]*

Each time Jesus used the solemn covenant name for God, *ōI AM.ō* And the Jews certainly understood what He was claiming.

John 8:59 *At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds.*

John 18:6 *When Jesus said, “I am he,” they drew back and fell to the ground.*

2. Jesus claimed to be equal with God.

Not only did Jesus ascribe to Himself the personal name of God, He also made other claims to deity. Many pious Jews referred to God as *ōour Fatherō* or *ōmy Father in heavenō* during times of prayer. But Jesus referred to God as His own Father in a much different way. His words claimed an exclusive relationship with God:

John 5:17-18 *Jesus said to them, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.” For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was*

he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

John 10:29-33 *My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one." Again the Jews picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus said to them, "I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?" "We are not stoning you for any of these," replied the Jews, "but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God."*

There was no mistake among His adversaries what Jesus was claiming. They accused Him of blasphemy because He was claiming to be God. He wasn't claiming to be a God, but the God, the one and only God of the Old Testament.

In his Gospel, John record seven *öIAMö* statements made by Jesus (6:5; 8:12 and 9:5; 10:7, 9; 10:11, 14; 11:25; 14:5-6). In each of these Jesus is making a claim to deity. For example, He proclaims in John 8:12 and 9:5 that He is the light of the world. But He makes that claim during the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem, where the custom was to light four candelabra at dusk to commemorate the pillar of fire with which God led His people through the wilderness. God was the light in the darkness for the Jewish people. When Jesus claimed to be the Light in this context, He was claiming to be the God who led them out of the darkness. He was claiming to be Yahweh. When Jesus said, *öI am the good shepherdö* (John 10:11, 13), He was echoing God's own words:

Ezekiel 34:11-12 *"For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. ¹²As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness.*

3. Jesus claimed to possess the attributes of God.

All the attributes attributed to God Jesus claims for Himself. He took upon Himself the authority to forgive sins, and every Jew knew that only God could forgive sins (Matthew 9:2-6). He claimed to be Lord of the Sabbath (Luke 6:5) and even the Judge of the nations.

Matthew 25:31-32 *"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.*

Ezekiel 34:17 *"As for you, my flock, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will judge between one sheep and another, and between rams and goats.*

He even prayed, *öAnd now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began* (John 17:5). Even God's glory belonged to Him, a glory God had sworn He would not give to another:

Isaiah 42:8 *"I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols.*

öAmong these Jews there suddenly turns up a man who goes about talking as if He was God. He claims to forgive sins. He says He has always existed. He says He is coming to judge the world at the end of time. Now let us get this clear. Among pantheists, like the Indians, anyone might say that he was a part of God, or one with God: there would be nothing very odd about it. But this man, since He was a Jew, could not mean that kind of God. God, in their language, meant the Being outside the world Who had made it and was infinitely different from anything else. And when you have grasped that, you will see that what this man said was, quite simply, the most shocking thing that has ever been uttered by human lips.ö¹

What did Jesus' disciples say about Jesus?

It is not as surprising that Jesus would *claim* to be God as it is that His disciples *believed* He was deity. A group of pious Jews steeped in the beliefs of the Old Testament, with a firm belief in one God and a reverence for the covenant name of God, held that this Jesus was indeed God in human flesh. They had every reason not to believe Jesus was God. But they were so convinced that they eventually died for that belief. Even Paul, a Pharisee who legalistically kept every letter of the Law and persecuted Christians for their faith in Jesus, came to believe Jesus was exactly who He said He was.

ōThe testimony comes not from Gentiles to whom the deification of an emperor was more like a promotion to the upper chamber.øIt comes from Jews. And Jews were the most fiercely monotheistic race of that age. For a Jew to speak of a man, Jesus, in terms which showed him as sharing in the deity of God, was a quite astonishing feature of earliest Christianity.ö²

John, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wrote, ōIn the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been madeö (John 1:1-3). In the beginning, the Word (Jesus) already was. He had no beginning and is therefore co-eternal with God Himself. This Word was with God, so He was separate from God, and yet at the same time the Word was God (deity). Paul and others also expressed belief in the deity of Christ:

Colossians 1:19 *For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him,*

Colossians 2:9 *For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form,*

2 Corinthians 4:4 *The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*

Hebrews 1:3a *The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.*

In Paul's letter to Titus, he refers to Jesus as Savior (1:4 and 3:6) and to God as Savior (1:3; 2:10 and 3:4). Paul appears to be using Jesus and God interchangeably; both are Savior. In Titus 2:13 he refers to Jesus as both God and Savior: ōwhile we wait for the blessed hopeö the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.ö This verse is extremely interesting in its construction. It is similar to 2 Peter 1:1b, ōto those who through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours....ö Both these verses follow a specific rule affirmed by Greek scholars: When the word *kai* (Greek for and) connects two nouns of the same case, if an article precedes the first but not the second, the latter always relates to the same person that is expressed or described by the first noun ö it is a further description of the first named person.³ For instance, if I wrote the phrase (in Greek), ōthe mother and the friend of Paul,ö I would be speaking of two different, distinct people, because the article ōtheö precedes both nouns (mother and friend). If the mother and friend were the same person, I would write, ōthe mother and friend of Paul.ö This is how Titus 2:13 and 2 Peter 1:1 are written: ōthe God and Savior Jesus Christ.ö If Paul had meant to say both God and Jesus as separate people, he would have written, ōthe God and the Savior Jesus Christ.ö Paul is stating the deity of Christ.

Ultimate worship belonged to God alone:

Isaiah 45:23 *By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear.*

And yet, Paul tells us that it will be at the name of Jesus that every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Philippians 2:10-11). And Paul concludes by adding, ōto the glory of God the Father.ö How could everyone bowing to Jesus bring glory to the Father except they be one in essence and nature?

Thomas, the disciple who doubted the resurrection, exclaimed at seeing the risen Christ, ōMy Lord and my God!ö (John 20:28). His exact words were, ōthe Lord of me and the God of me.ö Use of the term ōthe Godö (with the article) referred to the one and only Jehovah God of the Old Testament. Thomas's words are clear ö He was attributing deity to Jesus. It was the resurrection that proved to Thomas that Jesus was indeed who He claimed to be ö God.

Although this testimony should be enough to convince someone that the Bible teaches Jesus is God, there is more evidence. Many of the titles referring to the God of the Old Testament are also given to Jesus.

Isaiah 44:6 *“This is what the LORD says—Israel’s King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God / **Revelation 1:17** When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last.*

Jeremiah 23:6 *In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness. / **1 Corinthians 1:30** It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.*

Psalms 24:10 *Who is he, this King of glory? The LORD Almighty—he is the King of glory. / **1 Corinthians 2:8** None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.*

Many Old Testament verses referring to God are interpreted as referring to Christ:

Isaiah 40:3 *A voice of one calling: “In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. / **Matthew 3:3** This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: “A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”*

Ezekiel 34:11-12 *“For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. / **John 10:11** “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*

Ezekiel 34:17 *“As for you, my flock, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will judge between one sheep and another, and between rams and goats. / **Matthew 25:31-32** “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.*

How can Jesus be both God and the Son of God?

This is one of those areas where the concept of the trinity can be very confusing. The Bible teaches there are three distinct persons of the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The designations of father and son certainly don't refer to a physical relationship. Jesus existed long before He was physically born in a Bethlehem stable. They are a reference to position and submission. The designations are probably for our benefit (since we are unable to understand the concept of the trinity), so we have a logical way of perceiving the relationship between God and Jesus. When Jesus claimed that He and the Father were one, He didn't mean they were one person, but one essence or nature. The word "one" often carried the understanding of corporate oneness, just as in Genesis 2:24 where a man and women became "one" flesh. The concept of the trinity, that there is one God-head in three persons, is infinitely complex and incomprehensible to the human mind. But the possibility is seen even in Genesis 1:26, when God says, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness...." The trinity had always existed, but when the concept was revealed by Christ, it was met with hostility.

I realize how difficult it is to fathom this concept of oneness yet separateness. People have tried to explain it using the illustration of water, which can be in three distinct forms yet still all be water, or in reference to the sun, which consists of a hydrogen core, light and heat. But any example in the physical realm is entirely inadequate. How can the infinite greatness of God be reduced to human terminology? The closest example we have is *us* - created in the likeness of God. We have a physical body, a soul (or mind), and a spirit. Each component is separate yet completely intertwined. Let's think about this logically, though. If we could completely comprehend God, would He still be God? We have finite minds that were created by Him. Is it really possible that we could completely grasp the infinite? Of course not.

Some deny the possibility of the Trinity based on references to Jesus being the "firstborn" and the "only begotten" Son of God, which they interpret as stating Jesus was created by God. These terms can be confusing

unless we understand what was meant. Colossians 1:15 reads, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation." The word "firstborn" can also be translated "original bringer forth," which would indicate that Jesus was co-creator of all creation. The term is indicative of preeminence, not procession. A look at the Old Testament proves this. In Genesis 41:51-52, Manasseh is called the firstborn, but in Jeremiah 31:9, Ephraim replaces him as the firstborn, as the preeminent one. "Firstborn" doesn't mean the first one to be born, but the preeminent one with the rights of inheritance.

The phrase "only begotten" used in John 1:18, 3:16 and elsewhere means "unique" or "one of a kind." The New International Version of the Bible captures the essence of the word by translating it "One and Only." It is an expression of uniqueness. In Hebrews 11:17 Isaac is called the "only begotten" son of Abraham. He was certainly not the oldest or the only son, but he was uniquely precious.

Does it really make a difference whether or not Jesus was God?

There are many pseudo-Christian cults today that deny the deity of Christ. They believe He was created by God and was less than God Himself. Does it really matter? Isn't it enough to believe Jesus was sent by God and performed amazing miracles and rose from the dead? Isn't it enough to believe that He came to show us the way to heaven? Why is it so important to believe Jesus is God? First, because He said so. Jesus claimed to be God. If He wasn't, He was a liar. We'll examine that prospect in our next chapter.

1. If Jesus is God, God exists.

Jesus claimed to be God and proved it by His resurrection. Therefore, using inductive reasoning (reasoning based on the accumulation of evidence), God must exist. Jesus Christ was God in the flesh. He is the crown- ing, tangible, objective proof that God does indeed exist. In chapter 2 we attempted to prove the existence of God through all types of philosophical reasoning. But none is as convincing as the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is proof not only that God exists, but also that He wants to establish a relationship with His people.

John 1:18 *No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.*

John 3:16-17 *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*

Through Jesus Christ the great God and Creator of the Universe reached down to man to reveal Himself and His love for those He created. He provided a way for our sins to be forgiven and for us to be reconciled to Him. He made a way for us to have eternal life and revealed it to us through His Son.

2. If Jesus is God, our sins can be forgiven.

This was God's law throughout the Old Testament: The penalty for sin was death. Every single person from the time of Adam on was sentenced to the death penalty. Temporary atonement could be made through the sacrifice of an animal, but such sacrifices could never fully cleanse the worshipper (Hebrews 9:9; 10:4). A permanent sacrifice was needed. If Jesus wasn't God, we would still be in our sins. A single man can only pay for the sins of a single man. It would take an omnipotent God to pay, through a single sacrifice, for the sins of all men and women for all time. Because Jesus Christ was fully human, He could atone for the sins of a human being. Because He was fully God, He could atone for the sins of every human. If He weren't God, there would be no hope for us. This is why Paul stated that if Christ had not risen, we would still be in our sins (1 Corinthians 15:17), because His resurrection was proof of His deity.

3. If Jesus is God, then His assessment of our fate is true.

If Jesus is truly God, we must admit that everything He taught while on earth was absolutely true. And He testified concerning the end of all things. This is where unbelievers have the most difficulty. The Bible tells us about the end of all things and a final judgment that is to come. It testifies that there is a heaven and a hell and that only those who accept Christ will be admitted to heaven. That is complete nonsense to the skeptic (and to the analytic philosophers). How can anyone know what lies in the future? If Jesus is God, then He does know

the future. He will come to judge all men and we can be certain that His prophecies are completely true.

John 5:21-30 *“For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him.*

“I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life. I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man.

“Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned. By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me.

Matthew 7:21-23 *“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’*

Matthew 8:11-12 *I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”*

Matthew 10:32-33 *“Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.*

Matthew 12:35-37 *The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.”*

4. If Jesus is God, then every other religion is false.

No other religion but Christianity holds to the deity of Christ. And Jesus said that if we don't believe He is the one He claims to be, we will die in our sins. That makes every other religion completely worthless as far as eternity is concerned. If Jesus was who He said He was, which He proved by His resurrection, then everything He taught was true and every other religion, by logical corollary, must be false. Christianity is an exclusive religion. God never allowed eclecticism.

5. If Jesus is God, then He is worthy of our worship and our very lives.

If Jesus is God, then every human being is responsible to that God and accountable to Him because we were created by Him. This is why most people reject Christ — not because of the evidence, but because they don't want to change their lives. They want to be in charge of what they do. They are too proud to humble themselves before the God who made them.

Christianity hinges on the resurrection because it is the proof of everything: that Jesus was who He said He was, that all His teachings were true. All the statements that would be considered nonsense to the analytic philosophers become synthetic statements: they can be proven on the basis of Christ's resurrection from the dead. If He truly rose from the dead, He is God. If He is God, then He knows the mind and purpose of God, He knows the deepest needs of man, He knows the future, and He commands, by His very nature, obedience and worship.

End Notes

¹ Quoted by Josh McDowell and Bill Wilson, *He Walked Among Us: Evidence for the Historical Jesus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1988, 1993), p. 3144.

² *Ibid.*, p. 317.

³ H.E. Dana and Julius Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto: The Macmillan Company, 1927, 1955), p. 147.