ONE

Is Christ Truly God?

You might recall the ad that appeared in many newspapers back in 1982 proclaiming: "CHRIST IS NOW HERE." Our Lord Maitreya, the long-awaited world ruler, had arrived.

Buried in the fine print was the statement that this man was known by Christians as the Christ; Jews called him the Messiah; Buddhists called him the fifth Buddha; Muslims called him Imam Mahdi; and Hindus called him Krishna. Then came the punch line: *These are all names for the same person.*

I didn't expect to find this kind of heresy in the church. But one evening at a religious gathering I found myself seated next to a popular woman pastor who skillfully blends Christianity with the New Age movement, which teaches that God exists within every person and simply is awaiting discovery. "Do you believe that Christ is the only way to God?" I asked, quite sure that she would deny such an exclusive claim. "Of course I believe Christ is the only way to God," was the direct reply. "What makes you think I wouldn't believe that?"

But I persisted. "Do you believe that all the religions of the world are equally valid?" I asked, forcing her to define her doctrine with more precision. "Yes, I do," she answered candidly.

"Then how does this square with the view that Christ is the only way to God?" I asked, puzzled at what seemed to be a contradiction. *"When I speak about Christ, I am not speaking about Jesus of Nazareth"* was her honest reply.

For her, the name *Christ* was generic, to be used for whatever god one wished. Christ was the one universal that exists in every person. This Christ, she candidly admitted, was not the Jesus of the Bible.

Theology has always been important, but never more so than today. Unwittingly, the church is imbibing old heresies without recognizing it. That's why we must return to the early councils of the church. They were convened to clarify doctrine, to pinpoint heresy, and to give a rationale for Christian beliefs. Given the popular widespread misconceptions of Christianity, it is time we returned to the basics. If we don't, thousands of people who believe they are Christians will discover in the day of judgment that they were misled.

The Council of Nicaea, which met in A.D. 325, defined the most important doctrine of Christendom. Out of that gathering two primary views about Christ emerged. Though they differed in wording by only a single letter of the Greek alphabet (an *iota* if you please), the bishops uncovered a theological chasm, which is with us until this day. On the one side are those who speak well of Christ but believe he is somewhat less than God; on the other are those who believe that Christ is God of very God. This council showed why it is possible to believe in Christ yet be damned forever. Thousands who call themselves believers will someday discover to their horror that they *believed in the wrong Christ.* More of that later.

Suppose you were reading the New Testament for the first time. How would you interpret Christ's prayers to God the Father? Would you conclude that he was less than God? And if he is God, was he only talking to himself?

The early church confronted a puzzling paradox. On the one hand, Christ was presented as being distinct from

God the Father. The Father spoke to Christ as his baptism; Christ, in turn, spoke to the Father often in prayer. Yet on the other hand, Christ was clearly presented as God; as Isaiah predicted, the Messiah would be "the Mighty God" (Isa. 9:6).

The early church fathers, for the most part, did not have a clear conception of the Trinity. They realized that the New Testament presents Christ as God but did not immediately face the question of how such a doctrine could be reconciled with the fact that there is only one God. If Christ is God, yet distinct from God the Father, are there not two Gods? And if the Holy Spirit also is God, are there not three?

One God or Three Gods

Think through this bit of theological history. To avoid believing in three gods, a teaching called "Monarchianism" spread throughout the church in the third century. This teaching (pronounced Mo-nar-chi-an-ism, which means "one ruler"), held that the so-called three persons were actually modes in which the one person manifested himself. Both Christ and the Holy Spirit are God the Father, but in a different guise. Just as the same man may be a father, a son, and a brother, so the one person of God the Father played different roles.

This form of Monarchianism affirmed the true deity of Christ, but was forced to conclude that the Father himself became incarnate. Noetus, one of its leaders, wrote, "When the Father had not yet been born, he became the Son, he of himself and not another."

Although Monarchianism affirmed both the unity of God and the deity of Christ, it was judged as heresy. It could not satisfactorily account for those instances in which Christ spoke to his Father, for it would have to conclude that Christ was speaking to himself. Or in what sense could the Father forsake the Son on the cross if the

Son was simply the Father in a different role? Did the Father forsake himself?

Tertullian of North Africa (ca. 160–215), one of the first theologians to affirm the tri-personality of God, accused the Monarchians of denying the Holy Spirit and believing that God the Father was crucified. This doctrine was never a serious threat to Christendom as a whole. Though it still survives today among some who belong to the Jesus Only sect, it has largely passed off the scene.

Of course, we can fall into this ancient heresy when we thank God the Father for dying on the cross for us. Doctrinal accuracy requires that the persons of the Trinity be kept distinct.

But we are already ahead of the story.

Setting the Stage

After the emperor Constantine was converted to Christianity in A.D. 312, he issued an edict that granted toleration to the Christian religion and in essence proclaimed Christianity the religion of the empire. He inherited a church that was seething with discussion regarding the person of Christ. To us moderns, theology is confined to the classroom, but in those days everyone was caught up in the debate. One bishop described Constantinople as preoccupied with these discussions. He said that if you asked someone for change in the marketplace, he would discuss with you whether Christ was begotten or unbegotten. If you asked about the quality of bread, you would receive the answer that "God the Father is greater, the Son is less." If you suggested that a bath was desirable, you would be told that "there was nothing before God the Son was created."[1]

Confused by these theological debates, Constantine was persuaded to convene a general council at Nicaea to resolve the bitter disputes. He hoped a consensus could be reached and reconciliation brought about. If not, the church could not unite the empire. In those days religious unity was the foundation for political unity.

Outlining the Issues

Let's get some perspective on the views that were debated in various parts of the country.

Back in the previous century (about A.D. 250), Origen, a theologian from Alexandria in Egypt, asserted that the Son was subordinate to the Father. He sometimes even referred to the Son as the *Theos Deuteros*—the second God. Yet strangely, he also claimed to believe in the deity of Christ. Exactly what he meant by the subordination of the Son to the Father is unclear.

Arius, a presbyter in Alexandria, took Origen's view a step farther. If the Son has a different essence from the Father, it is logical to suppose that he is a created being. This would explain the subordination of the Son to the Father in such passages as John 14:28 where Christ said, "I go to the Father, for the Father is greater than I." Other relevant passages are Mark 13:32; John 5:19; and 1 Corinthians 15:28.

"If the Father begat the Son, he that was begotten had a beginning of existence," Arius said. "And from this it was evident, that there was a time when the Son was not."

Arius believed that the Son was created out of nothing, but he was the first and the greatest of the beings brought forth by God. Through the Son the world was created. The Son is worthy of worship because he was adopted by God.

This view was acceptable to those who were influenced by the paganism of the times. If you don't think that theology is often affected by the prevailing philosophy of the day, just think about how neatly the idea of a created Christ fit the mind-set of Greek thought.

The Gnostics (pronounced nos-tics, from the Greek word for *knowledge)* believed that matter was evil and, therefore, it was not possible for God to become man. If he were to do so, he would become tainted with evil. They claimed they had hidden knowledge, which led them to the conclusion that there was one supreme God who dwells alone, but there are many lesser gods who do

God's work, passing between heaven and earth. Christ could be considered as the greatest of these created gods and thus fit quite well within the context of Greek philosophy. To the pagan mind this was an acceptable theory, more believable than the doctrine that Christ, the Word, existed from all eternity and was equal to God the Father. As mentioned, if God became man, he would have been tainted with corruption. To make Christ less than God fit the pagan philosophy of the day.

Arius' views became influential because he was skilled in communication. He put his ideas into jingles, which soon became popular with the common people in the marketplace or children at school.

Today many cults find their champion in Arius. The Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, believe that Christ is *a* god but not fully God. To quote one of their founders, Charles Russell, "Being God's first creation, he was with the Father in heaven from the beginning of all creation, Jehovah God used him in the creating of all other things that have been created." Verses such as Colossians 1:15 and Revelation 3:14, where Christ is called "the beginning of the creation of God," are used to show that Christ was the first of the created beings.

Arius represented these views at the Council of Nicaea. He had gained a considerable following, and now the church had the opportunity to evaluate his position in the light of the Scriptures.

The opposite position was defended by the great theologian and apologist Athanasius (ca. 296–373). A champion of orthodoxy, he insisted that Jesus Christ was fully God and had the same essence as the Father. Specifically, he argued for the doctrine of the trinity, that God was a tri-unity. He affirmed that the following propositions could be held without contradiction: (1) Christ and the Holy Spirit are both fully God; (2) both are, in some sense, distinct from one another and from the Father; and (3) God is One.

Athanasius believed the three persons were not separate, which would lead to polytheism, but shared oneness of substance or essence. As church historian, Reinhold Seeberg wrote that Athanasius realized that "only if Christ is God without qualification, has God entered humanity, and only then have fellowship with God, the forgiveness of sins, the truth of God, and immortality been certainly brought to men."

It seems clear that either Christ was God or he was created. But every council has someone who believes he has found a compromise that will satisfy both parties. Historian Eusebius of Caesarea led a large middle party that claimed it could bridge the gap between the other two views. He sided with the Arians by saying that Christ was of a different substance from God the Father, but agreed with Athanasius that Christ was divine. He suggested that the nature of Christ be described as *homoiusios* (similar) to that of God the Father. Christ would be ***like*** God, but he would not ***be*** God without qualification.

So the stage was set for one of the most important church councils in history. Which of the three views would win the day?

The Council Meets

Constantine realized that these differences were about to tear his Empire apart. He had chosen to move the capital of the empire from Rome to Byzantium (later the city would be named Constantinople in his honor; the modern name is Istanbul). So he asked the delegates to come to Nicaea, just 25 miles from the new capital. Thus in A.D. 325, 318 bishops met to wrestle with the question of the deity of Christ and the Trinity. Just think of the circumstances! Here were men who had been persecuted for their faith just a few years before. Many of them could show scars of their days of torture. Yet now, because of the

conversion of Constantine, they went openly to the council, all expenses paid by the emperor!

Constantine himself gave the opening speech. He reminded the bishops that they had to resolve these theological matters because division in the empire was worse than war. He hoped for a quick and amiable resolution.[2]

Arius was invited to state his views, that Christ was a created being, that he was the first and the greatest of the created beings, but created nonetheless. "The Son had a beginning, but God is without beginning."

The assembly soon denounced this as heresy. Blasphemy. That much was settled.

More difficult, however, was the challenge of Eusebius of Caesarea. He was both a personal friend of the emperor and an admirer of Arius. So he presented his compromise. Christ can be called God, but his substance is different from that of God the Father.

But most of the bishops present believed that if Christ had a different substance than the Father, he could not be called God in the full sense of the term. Only if he had the *same* substance could he be God.

The position of Athanasius was then presented. This, you will recall, was the belief that Christ was "true God of true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father." The Greek word used was *homoousion,* "of one substance." This creed could not be interpreted in any other way than to say that Christ was God without qualification.

After several days of debate, the emperor saw that the compromise of Eusebius would not be adopted. A consensus was developing toward the view that Christ was of the *same* substance as God the Father. Thus the emperor decided to intervene and side with Athanasius, who had insisted that Christ was fully God, of one substance with the Father. Thus the Nicene Creed emerged:

"I believe in one God the Father Almighty; Maker of

heaven and earth . . . And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds. God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father."

All but two of the bishops signed the creed. These two, along with Arius, were sent into exile. Constantine held a great banquet to celebrate the outcome, believing that his empire would now be unified. Eusebius, who had lost on the compromise position but later signed the new creed, wrote that all the bishops were present at the table of the emperor, with bodyguards and soldiers standing with sharp swords drawn . . . and among them the men of God could walk fearlessly. "Easily one could imagine this to be the kingdom of Christ or regard it as a dream rather than a reality."

But the victory was clouded. Some of the delegates believed that it was Constantine's influence that determined the outcome. After all, he had thrown his political weight behind Athanasius. Thus some dissenters argued that the outcome was based on political rather than theological considerations.

Athanasius himself was displeased that Constantine had personally entered the debate. He would rather have convinced the delegates by his own arguments than to have the dispute settled by a politician.

Unfortunately, the debate was far from settled. Arianism spread though many of the churches and subsequent emperors sided with whatever party had the majority at the time. Dissenters were banished. Athanasius continued to oppose Arianism with such tenacity that when told that everyone was opposing him he said, "Athanasius against the world!" Five times he was driven into exile, but he never wavered in his commitment to the full deity of Christ.

Later the Arians began to disagree among themselves and their influence waned. The council of Rome (341)

and the council of Constantinople (381) ratified the Nicene Creed, which is the basis of orthodoxy to this day.

Is the Nicene Creed theologically correct? Sometimes it is said that the Bible nowhere says explicitly that Christ is truly God, sharing the divine essence with God the Father. But the following passages directly affirm the full deity of Christ (Isa. 9:6; John 1:1; Rom. 1:5; Heb. 1:8). In addition, there are dozens of other passages where Christ is *indirectly* declared to be God because the attributes of deity are ascribed to him.

What about those references that speak of Christ as "the beginning of the creation of God" (Col. 1:15; Rev. 3:14)? In both instances, the word used is *prototokos,* which means *first-bearer.* Christ is the preeminent One over all creation. Even if the word be translated *firstborn,* this would not imply that Christ was the first being to be created. Though Jacob was younger than his brother, Esau, Jacob was the firstborn. It is not a matter of time but status that determines who the *firstborn* is. Christ is the preeminent One.

Why Is This Important to Me?

Critics have sometimes been amused that the Council of Nicaea split over one "iota." Remember that the difference between the words *similar* and *same* in Greek is but one letter of the alphabet, the letter "i." It is just like theologians to split hairs, arguing over minutae that have little to do with the real world. How much better to help the poor or get involved with the politics of the day!

William E. Hordern tells a story that illustrates how a single letter or comma can change the meaning of a message. Back in the days when messages were sent by telegraph there was a code for each punctuation mark. A woman, touring in Europe, cabled her husband to ask whether she could buy a beautiful bracelet for $75,000.

The husband relayed the message back "No, price too high." The cable operator, in transmitting the message, missed the signal for the comma. The woman received the message which read, "No price too high." She bought the bracelet; the husband sued the company and won! After that, the users of the Morse code spelled out punctuation. A comma or an "iota" can make a big difference when communicating a message![3]

Although Nicaea was divided over the Greek words *similar* and *same,* the issue was incredibly important. The theologians of past centuries understood that all other social and moral issues cannot compare with the significance of the doctrine of the deity of Christ. The real question is whether Christ is capable of being the Savior of mankind.

Even if Christ were the highest and most noble creature of God's creation, God would then only be indirectly involved in the salvation of fallen man. Salvation would have cost God little. One of his creatures would have suffered for mankind; God would have delegated "the dirty work."

But could salvation have been brought about if God had delegated the suffering to one of his creatures? No. Only God himself can reconcile man to himself. As Bishop Moule put it, "A Savior not quite God would be like a bridge broken at the farthest end." The consistent teaching of the Bible is that God suffered; that is why we can say *salvation is of the Lord.*

Think of it this way: God needed a ransom so that man might be forgiven, but only he could meet his own demands. A judge in California declared a man guilty of a misdemeanor and handed out a sentence. But he then left the bench and *paid the penalty he had demanded.* In salvation, God both declares us guilty and pays our debt. Only he can satisfy his own requirements. A savior less than God would be disqualified; God must do it himself.

The deity of Christ must also be affirmed to keep us from idolatry. Christ here on earth accepted the worship and prayers of people without a hint of embarrassment. He also forgave sin. The Jews of his day understood the implications with clarity and asked: "Who can forgive sins but God only?"

We have all wondered, "Is it OK to pray to Jesus?" It is true that Christ taught that we should pray to the Father in his name. But prayer to Christ is proper, too, for he is God without qualification. In heaven the Son is worshiped along with God the Father.

Several years ago, Bishop Pike, who denied all the major doctrines of Christianity, wrote a book entitled *The Other Side.* It is the story of how he tried to make contact with his son who had committed suicide. When Pike finally reaches his departed boy though a medium, father and son have a dialogue. So the father asks his son (in reality a demon impersonating his son) whether there is much talk about Christ on "the other side," to which the voice replies, "No, we don't talk about him much down here!"

Be assured of one fact: If after death you should find yourself in a place where there is not much talk about Jesus, you may be sure that you have ended up on the wrong side of eternity. The Book of Revelation is filled with hymns of praise and worship to Christ, the Lamb.

Christ tells us that he is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* comes in thirty heavy volumes, packed with information. Yet the writers never had to go outside of the twenty-six letters of the alphabet to write all that history, geography, and science. So it is with Christ. We need not go outside of him to find all the spiritual truth and wisdom we need. In him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.

If Christ is not God, then God has not saved us, and the worship that Christ accepted and his ability to forgive sins would have been blasphemous.

Which Christ Saves?

Let us return to the conversation I had with that pastor about the person of Christ. She believed that Christ was the only way to God but also affirmed that all the religions of the world were an expression of the Christ. Remember, she said the Christ she proclaimed was not Jesus of Nazareth.

Now we are in a better position to understand why thousands of people who believe in Christ will be lost. *They have believed in a Christ who is not qualified to save them.* In effect, they have believed in an Antichrist of one form or another. "By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; and this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now is already in the world" (1 John 4:2-3).

I have learned never to let a person tell me that he believes in Christ without asking, "Which Christ?" Albert Schweitzer, the humanitarian, believed in a Christ who was essentially insane; Rudolf Bultmann, the German theologian, believed in a mythological Christ; Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher, believed in a human Christ; many modern cultists believe in a created Christ.

The New Age movement that is gaining wide acceptance teaches that all the religions of the world are essentially the same, and their point of unity lies within the power of the mind. And according to some, this power should be called *Christ.* Even Mother Teresa, who is so highly praised by evangelicals, says that conversion means coming face to face with God as we accept him in our lives. "We become a better Hindu, a better Muslim, a better whatever we are. . . . What God is in your mind you must accept."[4] Apparently she believes that the Christ of Christianity is not necessary for conversion.

French priest Teilhard de Chardin expounded a new

theology in which the soul is the driving force of evolution. He taught that man was emerging into a new being ennobled by the universal spirit of the cosmic Christ. Christ is but a rung on the ladder of evolution.

But the most implicit faith, if placed in a Christ who is unable to save, will not get us to heaven. The question is, which Christ saves?

To answer that question we must return to the Nicene Creed. Only an incarnate Christ who is fully God qualifies to be a Savior.

The Trinity

As already indicated, to affirm the deity of Christ is to believe in the Trinity. For if Christ is God, yet distinct from God the Father, there must be at least two persons in the Godhead. But since the Bible also affirms that the Holy Spirit is God, the Godhead must exist as a triunity.

In his book *The Trinity,* Augustine further developed Nicene theology. He stressed the unity of essence and the trinity of persons in the Godhead. But he was careful to point out that they are not like human persons who are separate entities; rather, they have mutual interpenetration and interdwelling.

Augustine admitted that the word *person* is not a good term to use because it implies polytheism, but he used it "not in order to express [the relationship], but in order not to be silent." He realized that no words can properly express the trinitarian relationship. *Person* conveys a sense of individuality and separateness; *mode* is too impersonal.

One professor said, "If we could strip *person* of its sense of individuality or *aspect* of its impersonal quality, either would serve."

An analogy might help. Augustine said that because man was created in the image of God, his mind was an example of the Trinity: Memory, intelligence, and will each share the same substance, yet they are distinct in function. Yet

Augustine's illustration fails because these functions are too impersonal. We must affirm three persons, but sharing one substance.

Sometimes the charge is made that Christians believe a contradiction—that one equals three. This, of course, is false. We are not saying that one God equals three Gods, but that one God is revealed in three "persons," understanding that the word *person* cannot be interpreted in an individualistic sense.

Upon This Rock

The deity of Christ, then, is the foundation of Christian doctrine. It is not enough to believe in Christ, but to believe in a Christ who is able to save. *The amount of faith is not as important as the object of faith.* You may believe that the ice on a pond is strong enough to hold your weight, but if it is but a half inch, you will still fall through. Conversely, you may have doubts as you walk on ice a foot thick, but it will hold you despite your fears.

Faith alone does not save; only faith in a person qualified to save brings salvation to the human heart. Not all who say "Lord, Lord," will enter into the kingdom of heaven. The Christ of the cults is unable to pay the penalty for sin. To believe in a Christ who is less than God is to have faith that is misplaced.

The Council of Nicaea divided Christendom forever. On the one side are those who speak well of Christ but affirm he is less than God; on the other are those who believe he is "God of very God." These two streams of thought flow in different directions never to meet.

We should be grateful that those who have preceded us in the history of the church insisted that we believe in the Christ who is God. In his own person he unites God and man; in his death he reconciles man to God. Salvation or damnation; heaven or hell. That is what Nicaea was all about.

Notes

1. Bruce L. Shelley, ***Church History in Plain Language*** (Waco: Word Books, 1982), 113.
2. Shelley, 115.
3. William E. Hordern, ***A Layman's Guide to Protestant Theology*** (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 15-16.
4. Desmond Doig, ***Mother Teresa: Her People and Her Work*** (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), 156.