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# IF I HAD ONLY ONE SERMON TO PREACH

Sermons by Twenty-one Ministers

Edited, with an Introduction, by

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## Is Jesus God?

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*"In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God."*

—JOHN I - 1

WITH this verse as a text, I want to discuss the question: Is Jesus God? There is today no livelier nor acuter question than this in all the realm of religious thought and controversy, and there is not today nor at any other time a fact more fundamental to Christian faith or more essential to the existence of Christianity as a supernatural and authoritative religion than this of the Godhood of Jesus, Who in the prologue to John's Gospel is called "the Word."

### ATTACKS ON THE DEITY OF CHRIST

The deity of Jesus is a live question today because of the attacks made upon it. These attacks move along three lines.

The first moves in the direction of a bigger view of man. There are those who affirm that man is divine. All men are divine. Any man is divine. You are divine. It may surprise you to know it. You do not feel very divine, especially in some nasty humor or vile mood. You do not regard yourself as very much

## IS JESUS GOD?

of a god, especially when the Philistines make kindling wood of your plans. Yet there is a measure of truth in the statement that man is divine. He was made in God's image. He has divine potentialities and possibilities. By God's grace, he becomes a partaker of the divine nature. "We shall be satisfied when we awake in His likeness." But if Jesus was divine merely in the sense that you and I are divine, He was not God at all. He was merely a superman, and there is an infinite difference between a superman and God.

The second attack moves in the direction of a smaller view of Jesus. There are those who would explain away all the big things recorded of Christ. They pose as scientists, and proceed on the theory that a fact sensed by a flesh perception ranks ahead of one sensed by a spiritual perception. So they deny miracles, and regard the supernatural as a superstition. It is true they have not yet gotten through explaining, but they point to the victrola, the telephone, the wireless, to airships and the radio, and say: "Give us time!" Their position is that if they can explain away the miracles it will reduce Christ from a God to the measures of a man, a theory about which there may be a difference of opinion.

The third line of attack moves in the direction of an attenuated and diminished Deity. There are those who declare their belief in the deity of Christ and then proceed to tell us what they mean by deity. When they have finished, we discover that the thing they call

## IF I HAD ONLY ONE SERMON TO PREACH

Godhood is so elusive and negative that it is not Godhood at all. One of this class says: "Yes, I believe that Jesus was God. God is just a word for good. The root meaning of good is the root meaning of God. Jesus was good. He was without sin. There was no element of evil in Him. His nature, therefore, being free from sin, was the God or the perfect good." It does not seem to occur to these people that their theory would make Adam very much of a god until he fell out of Eden. If Jesus was God merely in the sense that He was not guilty of actual sin, His Godhood is fragile, and the church would be wise to carry accident insurance.

These are the three lines along which attacks are being made today on the Godhood of Jesus—a bigger man, a smaller Christ, and a thinner deity.

## IF THESE ATTACKS SUCCEED

Suppose these attacks on the deity of Christ succeed and we surrender our faith that Jesus was God, what follows? We have lost our Bible. If Christ was merely a good man, the Bible is merely a good book. It is on a level with other literature. It has no more authority than Shakespeare's plays or Mr. H. G. Wells' *Romantic History of the World*. The glory of the Bible is not its age nor its style nor its historical value nor its literary beauty nor its moral grandeur, but the fact that on its pages we meet the sublimest Figure in human history. "In the volume of the book it is written of me." If Jesus shrivels from a God to a

## IS JESUS GOD?

mere man, you may as well send your Bible to a museum.

If Christ loses His deity we lose our Saviour, for if Christ be not God, He cannot forgive sin. He may be a great Teacher, but He is not a Saviour. A gentleman said to me one day: "I am going to join the Unitarian Church." I said: "Then you will have no Saviour, for if Jesus is not God, He cannot save us from our sins." "That is true," he said, "but I do not feel the need of a Saviour." "How then do you regard Jesus?" I asked him. "I regard Him as the noblest and wisest and best of men." "But this wisest and noblest and best of men says that you need a Saviour, and that He Himself is the only Saviour, that there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved. If it be true that you do not need a Saviour, then He has deceived you and misled you and declared what is not true." Therefore if Jesus be not God, He is not even a good man.

If Christ's Godhood goes, we also lose our salvation. There can be no salvation without a Saviour. What we call salvation is merely a spasm of hysterics, a hypnotic mood, a piece of pious somnambulism. We may think our sins have been forgiven, and our natures changed, but it is merely a phase of auto-suggestion. If any change has been wrought, we have brought it about ourselves.

We also lose our heaven when Christ loses His Godhood. Whatever heaven is, it is the one bright spot on the far sky, our long home, where the weary journey

## IF I HAD ONLY ONE SERMON TO PREACH

ends, where God wipes all tears from our eyes, where sorrow and trial and disappointment are forever behind us. But if Jesus was not God He did not rise from the dead. If Christ did not rise, neither do we. We rot in our graves forever. The dead are gone from us not to return. We have lost our loved ones. We may sing: "Lead, Kindly Light," and "Jerusalem, The Golden," but there are no answering realities to these great hymns of hope. Heaven is merely a castle in the air and the golden city a mirage. There is nothing ahead but blank, sterile night.

We also lose our heavenly Father, for Jesus is the only One Who has taken fear out of God's face. The heathen and pagan cults think of God as a terror. Their gods frighten them, but there on the cross Christ lifted His hands pierced by the nails and tore away the veil fear had woven over the face of God, and as we look we cry: "Abba Father!" Jesus said: "He that hath seen me, hath seen the Father," but if He lied to us about Himself, He may have lied to us about the great Father, and there is no God left Who can comfort a weary heart or call a prodigal home from the far country.

These are some of the things involved in this question. When the fine phrase-makers of liberalism would spin their web of metaphysics and confuse us with speculative mist, it is well to keep in mind what is involved. If Christ be not God, we lose our Bible, our Saviour, our salvation, our heaven, and our heavenly Father. This is not a faith lightly to be surrendered.

## IS JESUS GOD?

Is there any good reason why it should be surrendered? I do not believe there is. Of course none cares to believe a lie. If Jesus is not God, there is no virtue in believing that He is, for there is no virtue in believing a lie. Superstition is without merit. Credulity has no power to save. But if Jesus is truly God, he who surrenders that faith for any reason, has swapped the universe for a toy balloon. I am not hunting for that kind of a trade.

### THE PROOF OF HIS DEITY

Was, then, Jesus God? Let us at once clear the way by saying that miracles are not the proof, whether they be the miracles of His ministry or of His Person. It may be as we go on that some day we shall discover the secret of the miracles and understand how Jesus in a perfectly natural way healed the blind, cured the lame and cleansed the lepers; but if we do, the discovery will not take from Him His Godhood; for He never based His claims on the signs He performed. Christ worked miracles to bless humanity, not to make a display of His power. As for the miracles of His Person, the virgin birth and the resurrection, it seems to me that Christ proves them far more than they Him.

The abstract argument for the Godhood of Jesus is brief, and from the standpoint of logic, unanswerable. Jesus was either God or He was not. If He was not God, He was either deceived about Himself or He deceived others about Himself. Was He deceived about Himself? Was He suffering from an hallucination?

## IF I HAD ONLY ONE SERMON TO PREACH

Was He mentally unbalanced? Was He crazy? There is not the slightest evidence that He was. On the contrary, He had perfect poise. He was calm and self-contained, always in possession of Himself, sound and sane in every position that He took and in every judgment He formed. That alternative, then, must be rejected. On the other hand, did He deceive others about Himself? Was He a fraud? Was He an impostor? Did He live a lie? There has never been a life of such absolute sincerity. He was truth incarnate, and His influence on mankind has been to create integrity of character, to make men trustworthy and dependable, to establish confidence between man and his fellows. That alternative must also be rejected. We are thrown back, then, on the first proposition, from which there is no escape, namely, that Jesus is God.

This abstract argument, however, fails to satisfy us, for saving faith is not the result of a mental process but of a life experience. People discover that Jesus is God as they learn to know Him and try to live Him. This was His challenge, and His only challenge. "If any man will do my will, He shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God or whether I speak from myself." Let us turn, then, to some of the convictions that come as a result of a life experience.

I believe that Jesus was God on the testimony of the Bible. At an annual luncheon of the alumni of Union Theological Seminary in New York City, at which I was present as a guest, one of the speakers made this

## IS JESUS GOD?

statement: "The Bible nowhere says that Jesus is God." At the conclusion of the luncheon a venerable Presbyterian minister came forward to the speakers' table and said to Dr. Lyman Abbott: "In your address you declared that the Bible nowhere states that Jesus is God." "Yes," replied Dr. Abbott, "and I stand by what I said." "What will you do, then," asked this minister, "with the prologue to John's Gospel, which says, 'In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God, and the word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth'?" "O, that does not refer to Jesus," said Dr. Abbott. "To whom, then, does it refer?" he was asked. Then Dr. Abbott became a bit confused and said: "Have you read such-and-such a book?" When these gentlemen are asked questions they cannot answer, this is their method. They usually refer you to some book.

Of course the Bible says that Jesus is God, not only in the opening chapter of John's Gospel, but over and over again. If language can say a thing, John says that Jesus is God. There is also that wonderful passage in Philippians, where Paul declares that "Jesus, though being on an equality with God, thought not Godhood a thing to be striven after, but emptied himself, (or humbled himself)." This means that Christ did not use His divine power for Himself, but for others. If to this extent He emptied Himself of Godhood, He must have possessed Godhood to begin with.

## IF I HAD ONLY ONE SERMON TO PREACH

One does not empty a vacuum. In the opening chapter of the epistle to the Hebrews, Jesus is declared to be "the brightness of the Father's glory and the express image of His Person." The entire Gospel of St. John was written to prove the Godhood of Jesus. This is the writer's statement in the closing verse of the twentieth chapter, where he says: "These are written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that, believing, ye might have life through His name."

There is only one way to get rid of the testimony of John's Gospel to the deity of Christ; that is to cut it out of the Bible. It is the method adopted by those who deny Christ's Godhood, but it is a poor argument that starts out to prove a thing by a certain document and begins by rejecting that part of the document which is unfavorable. Here is a witness—the Bible. It is clear and credible. I will match that book against all the guesses of the scientists who deny Christ's deity.

I believe that Jesus is God because He lived like a God. If He were merely a man, why is it that other men do not live as He did? We have His teachings. Why is it we do not faithfully practice them? We have this ideal of a perfect life, but we fall far short of realizing the ideal. When I was preaching to the soldiers overseas, a Jewish rabbi came to the camp to speak to the Jewish soldiers. Among these Jewish lads was one who attended a number of times the Protestant services. He asked the rabbi to tell him the difference between the Messiah of the Jews and the Jesus of the

## IS JESUS GOD?

Christians. The rabbi said: "The difference is that we Jews believe that the Messiah is still to come, whereas Christians believe that He has already come in the Person of Jesus." After a moment's meditation the young soldier said: "But, rabbi, when our Messiah comes, what will He have on Jesus?" Christ lived the perfect life, the kind of life God would be expected to live were He to become man. Who can suggest a single change that should be made in Christ's life to conform to this perfect ideal? He realized the ideal; because He lived like a God, it is not hard to believe that He was God.

I believe that Jesus is God because He died like a God. One day in the pioneer period of our country, a great statesman hitched his horse in front of a country church in the valley of Virginia and went inside. He was a stranger to the community. The congregation was composed largely of the farmers and their families from the neighborhood. In the pulpit was a blind preacher. As the statesman listened, he was spell-bound. The blind preacher was painting a picture of Calvary, of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus. He described the arrest, Christ's bearing before Pilate and the priests. He went on to speak of the actual scene on Calvary. He dwelt on the words that fell from Christ's lips as He hung on the cross, on the sublime moment when Jesus said to His Father: "Into thy hands I commit my spirit!" At the climax of this eloquent picture, the blind preacher in a voice that thrilled his audience exclaimed: "Socrates died like a

## IF I HAD ONLY ONE SERMON TO PREACH

philosopher, but Jesus Christ died like a God!" If there were nothing but that day on Calvary, it would be enough for me. There was something unearthly, heavenly, about Jesus. To Him, death was not defeat, but achievement. He did not suffer death. He accomplished His decease, for He was God.

I believe in the Godhood of Jesus because of His humanity. It was real. He possessed divine power, but He never used it for Himself. He could make bread out of stones, but He never changed a stone into a loaf to feed His own hunger. He was thirsty and tired as He sat by Jacob's well, but He was so human that He said to a sinning woman who had come to draw water from the well: "Give me to drink."

Christ's name for Himself was "Son of man." This expression occurs more than sixty times in the New Testament. In every case with two or three exceptions it comes to us over the lips of Jesus Himself. He took this name not because He had any doubt of His deity, but probably because He would emphasize to us the fact of His humanity. It is a little man who is jealous for his titles and attributes. A big man can get along with a plain name. And so Christ took a plain name, the Son of man, because He was a real God. It was His humanity that is stressed in that significant passage where Christ asked His apostles: "Who do men say that I, the Son of man, am?" Peter answered: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God!" He seems to say: "Thou art so much the Son of man, so human, Thy humanity is so big, so capacious, so racial,

## IS JESUS GOD?

so all-inclusive, that Thou art more than Son of man, Thou art the Son of God."

It is difficult to know where the human ends and the divine begins. They probably blend. But the greater always includes the less. Here in Christ's humanity there is such a glory about the less that it becomes easy to believe in the greater. As we become acquainted with Jesus, we find it easy to believe that He is God. It is this humanness that we long for in God.

" 'Tis the weakness in strength that I cry for,  
My flesh that I seek in the Godhead,  
I seek and I find it, O Saul,  
It shall be a Face like this face that receives thee,  
A Man like to me thou shalt love  
And be loved by forever, a Hand like this hand  
Shall throw open the gates of the new life to thee!  
See the Christ stand!"

I believe in the Godhood of Jesus because of what He claims to do. There are those striking passages, such as: "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest," and "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will and it shall be done unto you!" What amazing presumption in any but a God to make such statements as these! But I refer especially to those passages in which He claims to forgive sin, a thing which only God can do. He proved His ability to do it by wiping out the penalty. His enemies charged Him with blasphemy because He claimed to forgive sin and thus made Himself equal with God. But He

## IF I HAD ONLY ONE SERMON TO PREACH

replied: "Which is easier, to say, 'Thy sins be forgiven thee,' or 'Arise, take up thy bed and walk'?" That is: Which is easier, to forgive sin or to blot out its penalty? Then to prove that He had the power to forgive it, He blotted out the penalty of the man's sin, and the paralytic stood before them whole. It was for this that they killed Him. He made Himself equal with God. He could easily have denied it, but He let the charge stand. He could not deny Himself. And so they crucified Him because He claimed to be God, and they were too blind to see the proof He offered to support His claim.

Again, I believe that Jesus is God because of what He does. One could believe in Him because of what He did, because of His ministry to stricken human nature during those years when He was here upon earth in the flesh. But we need not go back into the past. The people who assail the deity of Christ might be disposed to challenge the record again. Therefore let us take His work today. "The Son of man has power on earth to forgive sin." The greatest miracle Christ ever performed He is daily performing. It is the miracle of raising, not a dead body, but a dead soul, of putting broken-down character on its feet again, of making the sinner a partaker of the divine nature. This miraculous ministry of Christ passes before our eyes daily. What He is doing today demonstrates His Godhood.

I believe in the deity of Jesus because of Christ's influence on the world. You cannot explain the early apostolic church if Jesus were a mere man. Before

## IS JESUS GOD?

His crucifixion, His disciples were timid, vacillating, cowardly. At the arrest they all forsook Him and fled. Then came that sudden change when nothing could daunt or deter them from their work, when they welcomed trial, persecution, martyrdom. What wrought this marvelous change? Christ had come back from the dead, and they knew beyond the peradventure of a doubt that their Master was God.

The rapid spread of Christianity during the first three centuries bears a similar testimony. There has been nothing like it in human history. We need to go back and read over again the story of those days. The faith of Jesus swept the world. So widespread was the acceptance of Christ that when the Roman emperor ordered the death of the Christians in a certain section of his army, he was told that to carry out the command would be to destroy the army.

The effect of Christ's influence on the world has been too big, too far-reaching, for a mere man to have produced it. It is going on upon an ever-increasing scale. There is no power that can stop it. Jesus is the Hero of the world today. He is the conquering Christ.

Added to all else is the experience of millions who can say with Paul: "I know whom I have believed!" One may not understand the dogma of the deity of Christ or the virgin birth or the resurrection, but he knows that only God can save, that it takes divine power to regenerate a soul. When one can say: "I know that I am saved," he has an argument for the

## IF I HAD ONLY ONE SERMON TO PREACH

Godhood of his Saviour which nothing can challenge.  
He can more easily doubt himself.

### THE BURDEN OF PROOF ON THOSE WHO DENY

Because of all this, and of other things that might be mentioned, we can go back to the prologue of John's Gospel with renewed confidence. Is Jesus God? It is a question to be answered with a great affirmative. The burden of proof is not on those who affirm, but on those who deny the Godhood of Christ. They can never prove their denial, not only because it is impossible to prove a negative, but because the positive proof of Christ's Godhood is unanswerable. What folly to try to build a sect around a negation! Even the devils believe and tremble.

Should Christ go, who would take His place? There is no substitute. There are many religious leaders and teachers. There is only one Saviour, of Whom we may say with Peter: "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life, and we believe and are sure that Thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God!"

It is not a smaller Christ the world needs today. It is a Christ bigger than all the creeds, bigger than all the churches. Christ is all of that. We have not yet explored His Personality. There are reserves in Him we have not touched. There are margins of power and sympathy and leadership awaiting the call of world conditions yet to be developed. We may rest assured

## IS JESUS GOD?

that as for the past, so for the future, this tall Figure on the world's skyline will suffice for race leadership.

Nevertheless, we must keep in mind that Christ does not shut out of His fellowship those who have but a partial view of what He is and of what He would do for them. Christ offers to men not a dogma, but Himself. As He is received and followed and experienced, doubts dissolve, and Christ discovers Himself to His followers. It is possible to have intellectual difficulties about many questions connected with Christ, and at the same time exercise saving faith in Him, for it is not with the head, but with the heart, that man believeth unto righteousness. It is one thing to deny the deity of Christ. It is another, and a very different thing, to want to believe it but to find oneself hampered with honest intellectual difficulties. Thus hampered, one may receive Christ for all that He is and for all that He would do for him, and as Christian experience unfolds, find faith taking the place of doubt.

If one can do no better, he can at least do this. He can give Christ the benefit of his doubts. It were far better to believe in Jesus as God and be troubled with doubt, than not to believe in Jesus at all. "Give us your faiths," said Goethe, "as for doubts, we have quite enough of our own." Let us say with Richard Watson Gilder:

"If Jesus Christ is a man'  
And only a man, I say

## **IF I HAD ONLY ONE SERMON TO PREACH**

**That of all mankind I will cleave to Him,  
And to Him will I cleave alway.**

**But if Jesus Christ is a God,  
And the only God, I swear  
I will follow Him through heaven and hell,  
Through earth, the sea, and the air."**