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## IS CHRIST INFERIOR TO GOD ?

by R. G. CRAWFORD

**L**AST time we published a paper by Dr. Crawford he was Senior Lecturer in the University of Ife, Nigeria. Now he is Head of the Department of Divinity in Northern Counties College, Newcastle upon Tyne. Some references in the following study of the Person of Christ are best understood against the background of the ecclesiastical history of Dr. Crawford's native Ulster. The "non-subscribers" whom he mentions were those Irish Presbyterians who opposed subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith, mainly because of their Arian sympathies. When in 1835 subscription to the Confession was made binding on all ministers, licentiates and elders in the Synod of Ulster, there was no more place for the non-subscribers in the Synod, and the Non-Subscribing Presbyterians of Ireland are in communion with the Unitarian and Free Christian Churches of Great Britain.

**T**HE status of Christ and His relationship to God has always been a matter of debate. Is He the "one man in the long roll of the ages that we can follow without disappointment and worship without idolatry," or is He simply a prophet who spoke gracious words and did mighty deeds? These questions have been raised again today when many modern theologians have placed more emphasis on the humanity of Christ than the divinity. Such emphasis can easily give the impression that He is inferior to the One who sent him.

But it was in the nineteenth century that a sustained attack was made on the unique status of Christ by those thinkers who refused to subscribe to the traditional creeds of the Churches.<sup>1</sup> They were willing to say that He possessed ample power, wisdom and understanding, to carry out His mission; but that He did not possess them by His own inherent right, as is the case with God. He was continually dependent for power, knowledge, guidance; and His message, mission, and authority were not His own but God's. His inferiority was shown by his worship of God; and there is no indication that he was ever worshipped as God. With regard to the latter point they examined the various words used for "worship" in the New Testament (τιμᾶω, Matt. 27: 9; προσκυνέω, Matt. 18: 26; δοξάζω, Matt. 6: 2; Rom. 8: 30; σέβομαι, Mark 7: 7;

<sup>1</sup> W. H. Drummond, *Theological Works* (1829); J. A. Crozier, *The Life of Henry Montgomery* (1875); H. Montgomery, *The Creed of an Arian*; J. S. Porter, *Unitarianism* (1841), etc.

λατρεύω, Luke 1: 74), and concluded that σέβομαι and λατρεύω alone mean divine honours or religious adoration and they are never used in referring to Christ. They insisted that particular cases of prayer to Christ like that of Stephen in Acts 7: 59 do not mean a calling on Jesus but God. They would render the invocation: "O Lord of Jesus," and not "O Lord Jesus".<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this article therefore is to discuss this question: Does Christ's subordination to God as shown by His dependence, worship, and (as the Non-Subscribers allege) His followers' lack of worship of Him, indicate inferiority?

First of all, an examination must be made of Christ's dependence upon God. The holders of the kenotic theory in its various forms would have no difficulty in answering the Non-Subscribers when they assert Christ's dependence on God for power and knowledge. But, apart from kenoticism, dependence is a necessary part of sonship and cannot necessarily mean inferiority. The Church has always admitted that in the Pauline writings and the Johannine, the Son is subordinate to the Father. This appears true not only of His incarnate life but also His pre-existent and post-resurrection state (Col. 1: 19; Phil. 2: 5ff.; 1 Cor. 15: 24, 28). But only a materialistic kind of conception of God would make subordination synonymous with inferiority.

In the life of Jesus there is a transvaluation of values. This is seen in the foot-washing (John 13: 1ff.) where to be the greatest of all is to be servant of all. The materialistic conception of greatness that expresses itself in power and authority and giving of orders is quietly set aside. Humility and service are shown as the true greatness. They are not the denial of divinity but its actual product (John 13: 3, 4; cf. Mark 9: 35; 10: 45, Matt. 18: 3, Mark 10: 14, 15). To enter the kingdom one must set aside pride and become as a little child. Christ, Himself, is of necessity a child in dependence upon His Father or He has no place in the Kingdom. Christ's dependence is unique, so He is King among men, i.e., God's vicegerent (1 Cor. 15: 24-28). In the Fourth Gospel, this dependence of Christ, an ethical dependence, is central in all the teaching about Christ's relation to God.

The Son's dependence upon the Father is not an inferiority of dignity or nature (John 5: 22, 23) but subordination in the matter of function; and such subordination (like the subordination of a concerto soloist to the conductor), where both "persons" in the Godhead are co-essential and co-eternal, cannot involve inferiority.

<sup>2</sup> Porter, *Ibid.*, p. 73.

“Sex involves diversity of function without inferiority; so is it, too, in a fair division of labour, or in a true democracy. . . . A spiritual as opposed to a material conception of deity must allow for eternal dependence in the Son. The Son is not omnipotent *per se*, for all His power is His Father’s, and so with His other attributes.”<sup>3</sup>

It is remarkable how modern thinkers agree on this point. D. M. Baillie, who takes the paradox of grace as the explanation of the mystery of the Incarnation, says that the man in whom God was incarnate surpassed all other men in refusing to claim anything for Himself independently and ascribed all the goodness to God.<sup>4</sup> Paul Tillich holds that Jesus reveals God only as He is nothing in Himself:

He who is the bearer of the final revelation must surrender his finitude—not only his life but also his finite power and knowledge and perfection. In doing so he affirms that he is the bearer of final revelation . . . He became completely transparent to the mystery he reveals. But, in order to be able to surrender himself completely, he must possess himself completely. And only he can possess—and therefore surrender—himself completely who is united with the ground of his being and meaning without separation and disruption. In the picture of Jesus as the Christ we have the picture of a man who possesses these qualities, a man who, therefore, can be called the medium of final revelation.<sup>5</sup>

It follows that the place of most humility and abasement—i.e., the cross—is the greatest example of the “Power and wisdom of God”. There we see the final surrender of self, and the most complete unification of Jesus with God.

Bultmann explains the subordination passages in the Fourth

<sup>3</sup> J. E. Davey, *The Jesus of St. John* (1958), p. 140.

<sup>4</sup> *God was in Christ* (1948), p. 117. Baillie holds that Christ was so fully dependent upon God, that the kind of deep union with God we interruptedly experience in grace, was ever present in him. Richardson, however, observes that Baillie does not explain how Jesus’ response to God’s grace was not interrupted and partial. He holds that if we reply that it was due to an unusual and superabundant presence of grace, then we deny the reality of His humanity (*The Doctrine of the Trinity*, p. 152).

<sup>5</sup> *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I (1951), p. 148. Cf. Karl Barth in *The Humanity of God* (1961), p. 48. “God’s deity . . . is . . . His freedom to be in and for Himself but also with and for us, to assert but also to sacrifice Himself, to be wholly exalted but also completely humble, not only almighty but also almighty mercy, not only Lord, but also servant, not only man’s eternal King but also his brother in time.” Cf. Augustine: “The only remedy for the pride of man was the humility of God” (*De Trinitate*, 1.7). Barth in the *Dogmatics (Doctrine of the Word of God* (1936), p. 442) explains the subordinate passages as indicating the Lordship of God the Father. Christ is in the first place as revelation of such Lordship. Since Christ himself receives the *κύριος* title, the revelation is of His Lordship.

Gospel as not diminishing the Son's authority but establishing it. He thinks that the statements of such subordination (10: 18; 12: 49ff.; 14: 31, etc.) are there not to stress the humility of the Son in his dependence upon the Father. He points out that Jesus does not speak of his own accord (3: 34), neither did the High Priest (11: 51)—and we would not call the latter humble! He feels that 5: 17ff. refutes the idea of Christ's humility for, regarded from the Jewish standpoint, they would be blasphemous presumption. It is because Jesus does not speak of his own accord that He speaks the words of God (3: 34), and whoever hears Him rightly hears the words of God. What the writer of this Gospel is trying to make clear is not Jesus's humility but his authority: "the paradoxical authority of a human being speaking the word of God. In other words, it is the idea of the Revelation that the author is setting forth."<sup>6</sup>

Whatever way they may differ in their approach, modern scholars are agreed that the dependence of Christ as shown in the Scriptures does not indicate inferiority. The relation between Father and Son is not a servant and master one, or that of an inferior and a superior, but that of two in perfect unity in an eternal fellowship of love.

It is a state of being in which direction is the function of the one and obedience is that of the other in a relationship of love which robs direction of superiority and obedience of inferiority. It is our limited experience of such a unity which leads us to think of obedience as servility and of direction as lordship.<sup>7</sup>

Attention must be given now to the question of worship as indicating the inferiority of Christ to God. While the New Testament generally accepts the view that prayer is made to God through Christ there is evidence in the Fourth Gospel that prayer may be made to Christ, e.g.: "If ye ask anything in my name I will do it" (John 14: 14). The prayer life of Jesus Himself must have been necessary in order to confirm and develop His consciousness of Divine Sonship. It was one of the great mediums through which He grew and developed and became aware of His vocation.<sup>8</sup> Looked at, in this light, it can hardly be viewed as indicating His status of inferiority. Moreover, it is significant, that Jesus never prayed *with* his disciples though he prayed *for* them. "He stood apart, His relations to God were not theirs. They could not speak to God as

<sup>6</sup> *Theology of the N.T.*, E.T. (1952-5), Vol. II, p. 51.

<sup>7</sup> Vincent Taylor, *The Person of Christ in New Testament Teaching* (1958), p. 103.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186.

He spoke."<sup>9</sup> This is underlined in the developed Johannine theology. The prayer life of Jesus, which is so prominent especially in Luke, has almost entirely disappeared, and didactic public prayers take its place. The αἰτέω of the disciples is distinguished from the ἐρωτάω of Jesus, His visions are for the sake of others and most of his soul crises are omitted or obscured.<sup>10</sup> There is evidence too that such a confession as that of Thomas, "My Lord and my God", may have been used liturgically.<sup>11</sup>

With regard to the Non-Subscribers' discussion of the Greek verbs it is hard to maintain their position. While λατρεύω is used of the religious worship of God, it can also be used of secular service. In the Septuagint it is applied not only to God but also the worship of heathen deities.<sup>12</sup> With regard to προσκυνέω it means homage or respect as the Non-Subscribers indicate, but it can also mean the worship of God (Matt. 4: 10; Luke 4: 8; John 4: 24). Moreover, in Rev. 5: 14 both God and Christ are said to receive the same homage or worship from the elders (προσεκύνησαν).

As for Stephen's prayer in the Book of Acts it has been generally accepted as prayer to Christ. This seems to have been a common feature of Church life as recorded there for we have the phrase: "all that call upon the name . . ." (9: 14). Kirsopp Lake disputed this.<sup>13</sup> While recognizing it as indicating prayer to Christ, he felt that it was not the same as that offered to God. He found a parallel in the later Christian worship of the saints. This, however, Vincent Taylor rightly corrects. He points out that the practice of "calling upon the name of the Lord" does not stand alone; but is coupled with reverence for the name of Jesus so that into it believers are baptized (2: 38; 8: 16). Jesus is the object of faith (3: 16), and in Him and in none other is there salvation (4: 12). He is described as Prince and Pioneer of Life (3: 15; 5: 31), and is the Saviour exalted to give repentance to Israel and remission of sins (5: 31, cf. 13: 23f.).<sup>14</sup>

Throughout the New Testament doxologies are ascribed to Christ. They are found in II Peter 3: 18; Rev. 1: 5b, 6, and perhaps Rom. 9: 5. In the Book of the Revelation there are two doxologies addressed to both Father and Son, viz. Rev. 5: 13 and

<sup>9</sup> R. W. Dale, *Christian Doctrine* (1894), p. 106.

<sup>10</sup> J. E. Davey, *op. cit.*, p. 133. He is of course drawing our attention to this from a different standpoint than Dale.

<sup>11</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to John* (1958), p. 477.

<sup>12</sup> H. Strathmann in Kittel, *TWNT*, IV, pp. 59ff.

<sup>13</sup> *The Beginnings of Christianity*, IV (1933), p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 31.

Rev. 7: 10. Bultmann also classifies certain benedictions as prayers i.e., I Thess. 3: 11, 12; II Thess. 3: 5, 16.<sup>15</sup>

It is possible that Phil. 2: 6-11 which we have already discussed is a pre-Pauline hymn, as Lohmeyer holds.<sup>16</sup> The passage is dependent upon Isa. 45: 23, “. . . that unto me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear”. Yahweh is the object of worship here, although in the Hebrew text of this verse the word “Yahweh” does not occur. But the Septuagint refers to God θεός. Hence Paul speaks of Jesus where the prophet was thinking of Yahweh. Commenting on the phrase πᾶν γόνυ κάμψη Marvin Vincent<sup>17</sup> says that the meaning can only be that Christ is presented as an object of worship. It is quite possible that this passage could have been used as a hymn in worship as it is a well known fact that Jesus was praised in hymns and confessed in credal statements in connection with the Lord’s Supper and Baptism (Eph. 5: 19; Col. 3: 16; I Cor. 14: 26; cf. Eph. 5: 14; I Tim. 3: 16).

Maranatha (I Cor. 16: 22) appears to have been such an eucharistic prayer.<sup>18</sup> It appears in the *Didache* (10: 6) as a prayer. It meant both “Lord, come at the end to establish thy kingdom” and “Come now, while we are gathered at this meal (communion).”<sup>19</sup> O. Cullmann writes:

Not only is there no proof that Christ was not called upon in the earliest Christian worship; everything in fact speaks against the assertion that he was not—above all the Aramaic form of the liturgical prayer Maranatha itself.<sup>20</sup>

Paul assures us in II Cor. 12: 8 that he prayed to Christ. He besought the Lord concerning a thorn in the flesh. Some argue that “Lord” here means God the Father. This does not bear examination. The Lord’s reply to Paul was: “My power is made perfect in weakness” (v. 9). “My power” in “Christ’s power”, because in the same verse Paul says: “Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me”.

The evidence which we have gleaned therefore would dispute the

<sup>15</sup> *Op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 126ff.

<sup>16</sup> *Philippenerbrief* (1930), pp. 90ff.; cf. A. M. Hunter, *Paul and his Predecessors* (1940), pp. 45-61; Bultmann, *op. cit.* I, pp. 27, 125.

<sup>17</sup> *Philippians and Philemon*, I.C.C. (1897), *ad loc.*

<sup>18</sup> Cullmann, *The Christology of the N.T., E.T.* (1959), p. 210. Cf. H. Lietzmann, *Messe and Herrenmahl* (1926), p. 237. Bultmann, however, disputes this (*op. cit.*, I, pp. 51f.).

<sup>19</sup> Pliny the Younger refers to Christians meeting to sing “a hymn to Christ as God” (*Epp.* x. 96, 97).

<sup>20</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 213.

case of the Non-Subscribers or their modern counterparts that the acknowledged dependence of Christ upon God indicates inferiority. These Non-Subscribers who started as Arians and eventually became Unitarians basically failed to recognize that only God can reveal God, and that the Saviour must be a proper object of religious worship.

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