

“The Christian Form of Monotheism”

John 5:16-30

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Text Comment

We have now before us the third discourse of the Lord in the Gospel of John. You remember that this major book of signs which takes us from the end of the prologue in the middle of chapter one all the way to the end of chapter twelve is primarily an alternation of signs or miracles John's account of the Lord's miracles seven of them and discourses that the Lord delivered on different occasions. The first of these discourses was the one to Nicodemus concerning the new birth; the next was to the woman at the well concerning the water of life; and now this one to the Jews concerning his relationship with his Father in heaven.

- V. 16 suggests that the Lord is replying not simply to complaints about the incident related in the previous verses, where he healed the man at Bethesda's pool, on the Sabbath day but to other incidents the Lord's characteristic violation of the Sabbath norms of the Rabbinical school. We know the Jewish religious leadership was often offended by the Lord's behavior on the Sabbath day from the other gospels. But his reply in this case is not going to be what it was in, say, in Mark 2, where he simply denied that the rabbinical view of Sabbath observance he said it was incorrect they had mistaken the law of God and had misapplied it and that in fact what he was doing was keeping the Sabbath properly, according to its original intention. He was right and they were wrong about the Sabbath day. Nevertheless, he is about to give us a defense of his behavior but its of a different kind. The NIV's "Jesus said..." is literally "Jesus answered..." so its clear he is responding to complaints and objections they have made even though the actual words of his accusers have not been given.
- v.17 Now, interestingly, the Jewish theologians of the period in fact themselves taught that God's rest on the seventh day was not the rest of idleness, otherwise, once a week the world would not be actively ruled by its maker. What is startling is that Jesus applies the principle to himself: as the Father is always working, so must he be always working. For that defense to be meaningful, if you stop and think about it the principles that apply to God must apply to Jesus also and the Jews don't miss the implication of his remark.
- v.18 Augustine wrote: "The Jews understand what the Arians cannot grasp." We would say today the Jews understand what the Jehovah's witnesses cannot grasp.
- v.20 The NIV's "to your amazement" is literally "in order that you might marvel." He is speaking to unbelievers. And one of the great purposes of his miracles was to force on the mind and the conscience of people who did not submit themselves to Christ the unavoidable, the unmistakable evidence that he was the son of God.
- v.21 The OT, you remember taught that God alone was able to give life and to raise the dead. Remember the king of Israel when Naaman is sent to him by the king of Syria and he is

told you are supposed to cure this man of his leprosy? He replied “Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life?” No, only God can do that. The Jews knew that but here is Jesus saying he has that power.

- v.22 Just as the Son and the Father together give life, so they share the role of judge. God is known from the beginning of the Bible, remember, as “the Judge of all the earth.” Abraham calls him that. But that work of judgment the Father has entrusted to the Son.
- v.28 “Do not be amazed at this,” especially he is saying, that it is the voice of Jesus that is going to bring everyone to life on the great day. 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.

This passage we have read is not so memorable as many others in the 4th Gospel. It contains no immortal lines like “You must be born again” and it doesn’t have the drama of the Lord’s encounter with the woman at the well. There isn’t a verse in it that is among those commonly memorized by the navigators, for example. Probably, people turn to it more for the judgment scene in vv. 28-29 than for anything else. But it is, in its entirety, an extraordinarily important passage in the gospel of John and in the NT as a whole.

Bishop Ryle wrote about these verses.

“Nowhere else in the Gospels do we find our Lord making such a formal, systematic, orderly, regular statement of His own unity with the Father, His divine commission and authority, and the proofs of his Messiahship, as we find in this discourse.”

Other commentators point out that it was a huge risk for the Lord to say these things. His remarks left the Jews with that single famous alternative: to consider Jesus guilty of a monstrous blasphemy (or incredible stupidity or insanity) – making himself, a mere man, out to be God, equal with God – or to accept that what he said was true and bow down before him and receive him as the Son of God, the savior of the world. Here is the origin of that argument made so famous in the 20th century by G.K. Chesterton and C. S. Lewis. That we can receive Christ as God the son and worship him or we can consider him a madman or a fraud. But we are not any longer able simply to regard him as a great moral teacher as so many in the world want to do. He didn’t intend to leave that option open to us. Not claiming to be God as he did. “There is hardly any passage where Jesus appeals for men’s love and defies men’s hatred as He does here.” [Barclay in Morris, 311n] And he got their hatred more and more for it, as we read in v. 18.

And why is this? Because throughout this passage the Savior emphasizes his unity with God the Father, a unity that far transcends any kind of fellowship or communion or intimate knowledge that even the most godly human being might have had with God the Father through the ages of human history. Let’s examine what is said and see for ourselves.

The passage begins with the Lord’s remark identifying his working with the working of God the Father especially on the Sabbath day. The Jews did not miss the implication of what Jesus said and the fact that John repeats their charge without comment or contradiction is indication enough

that he accepts the force of what they say. Jesus *was* making himself equal with God. It is what we might call the “evaluative viewpoint” of the narrative. What follows is an account of *how* Jesus was making himself equal with God.

The Jews imagined, must have imagined given their viewpoint, that if Jesus was making himself out to be equal with God, he must have been making himself out to be *another* God, a *separate* God, not the same God as God the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, perhaps even a competing God. But, of course, to any Jew, to any Christian for that matter, that would be blasphemy, it would be idolatry, the worship of any other god but the one, true, and living God. It would be idolatry to set up anything or anyone as god and it would be blasphemy for a man to claim for himself such a status. Give the Jews credit. They were monotheists as Holy Scripture had taught them to be. There was no place for another god. Indeed, in the OT there are four men who at one time or another are said to have made themselves out to be God or to be like God and all of them were condemned mightily for their blasphemy: Pharaoh, Joash, Hiram of Tyre, and Nebuchadnezzar. [Carson, 249]

But, what is clear here and throughout the NT is that Jesus is not presenting himself as *another* God. The entire drift of his remarks is to emphasize his unity with the Father in heaven. He is not asserting his independence from God, quite the contrary. So there is this terrific mystery here and its not dispelled by the verses that follow. He is one with the father as he will later say, in Ch. 10 “I and the Father are one” but he is separate and distinct from the father he is equal with God the Jews saw he was claiming that he didn’t deny it he is equal with God. But, in what follows, he also declares his submission to God, his dependence upon his Father in heaven. And so his separateness from the father. He distinguishes himself from the Father in heaven as he stresses his unity with the Father in heaven.

John has already identified Jesus with God in the opening verses of his Gospel. He has asserted that it was Jesus Christ, God the Son, who was in the beginning with God and who was God and who created the world. John himself who witnessed his transfiguration, with Peter and James on that mountain in Galilee at the end of the second year of the public ministry says he saw the divine glory of Jesus Christ. So, what we have in the following verses is an explication, a development, and unpacking of what was made as great assertion of fact at the very beginning of the Gospel, that Jesus of Nazareth is God.

We begin in v. 19 where we read of a unity of action. There is this continual contemplation of the Father by the Son and a communion of action between the son and the Father. What the Father does the Son does. The Son is dependent upon the Father for his work. He does what his Father does. There is both the obedience to the Father by the Son and the equality with the Father for the son. For he does only what the Father does, there is the submission; *but he does whatever the Father does* – a claim that certainly could never be made by any human being mere creature! Not even the great prophets of the OT could ever come near saying that they did whatever God the Father did. This is an astonishing claim to equality with God, even as it is made in the spirit of submission to the Father.

In v. 20 we learn that There is a mutuality and intimacy of love between the Father and the Son. It extends to the complete disclosure of the Father's mind to the Son. The Father shows *the Son everything* he does, no secrets between the two.

In v.21 again we have the same. There is nothing surprising in the assertion that God could raise the dead. The Jews knew their Bible. They read Deut. 32:39: "See now that I myself am He! There is no God besides me. I put to death and I bring to life..." What is marvelous in this assertion is that Jesus has this same power *and that he is exercising that power at the moment, giving life to whomever he chooses.*

In v. 22 the identity of the Father's work with the Son's is extended to the matter of judging the world. Here, in a way, it is a stronger affirmation still, for Jesus says in fact that though everyone calls God the judge of all the earth, all the judging that is ever going to be done is going to be done by him. The Gospel began, remember, with the assertion that Jesus, the Son of God, had created the world. Now we are told that he is going to bring it to its appointed end.

And, then, in v. 23 that remarkable statement that, once again, goes far beyond what could ever be said of someone, however august, who was simply God's agent or ambassador. The Father intends that mankind should honor his Son as they honor him. In fact, the unity between the Father and the Son is so complete that honor paid to the one is paid to the other in the nature of the case and honor withheld from the one is withheld from the other. *This, of course, would prove to be the capital crime of the Jewish religious leadership they failed to honor the father by failing to honor his son!*

Vv. 24-27 largely repeat and amplify the points that have already been made. The Son has the power to give life. But there is an extraordinarily important thought in v. 26. It was a commonplace of Jewish thought, because the clearest teaching of the OT, that God alone was self-existent. Indeed, one famous scholar of NT Greek translates the first part of v. 26 in just that way: "the Father is self-existent." He alone has life that is inherent in his being. He alone has been living eternally. All other creatures owe their life to him. All other creatures began to be at some point--did not live before and began to live. Only God owes his life to no one. When children ask, as they sometimes do, but where did God come from? The answer the Bible gives is that God is the one, the only one, who was always there, he did not come from somewhere else, but everyone and everything else came from him.

But, the verse goes on to say that the Father has granted this self-existence to the Son. The Son too has life that is inherent in his being—must be if he is God. You will see that v. 26 begins with a "For." This is the explanation for why the Son can exercise divine judgment over mankind and why he has the power to give life even to the dead. He has in himself, like the Father, a self-existent life. Life is in him. It belongs to him intrinsically. Or, as we will later hear, "he is life!" It belongs to him and he can give to whomever he pleases.

As C.S. Lewis put it:

“God is so brim-full of existence that he can give existence away, can cause things to be, and to be really other than himself, can make it untrue to say that he is everything.”
[*Miracles*, 88]

Now, as you may know, this, v. 26, was an extraordinarily important verse for the formation of the Christian doctrine of the tri-unity of God in early Christianity leading up to the great creedal statements of the 4th and 5th centuries, one of which the Nicene creed, we sang in our worship earlier. And what makes this statement and then the surrounding statements about the relationship between the son and the father so significant for an understanding of the trinity, the three-in-one-ness of the one living God. Is that what is said here about the son, about Christ, seems very clearly to be said about him to that situation or as he was before he came into the world. The statements that are being made about him are not true simply because he has come into the world now and has taken to himself a true human nature and a true human body, its not as though only the human nature of Christ can say these things about his relationship with his father. This is what was true about Christ before he came into the world, this is what is true about him as God the son. For it seems clear that what is being said is that in some way, altogether mysterious to us, the Son derives his self-existence from the Father. Theologians have through the ages referred to this as the doctrine of “the eternal generation of the Son.” We confessed it in the phrase, “very God of very God”, all speaking of Jesus Christ, “begotten not made, being of one substance with the father” No one really knows what that means. We are confessing our faith, we’re not explaining this it is beyond us, a subject far beyond us, ineffable. But it seems clear that we are being told that Jesus is eternal life, he has self-existence in himself, and yet, in some way, he has derived that self-existence from the Father. We read in 1 John 1:2, for example, “we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.” He was already the eternal life but now he has appeared to us in the form of a man. There is some relationship that has existed eternally between the first person of the Godhead and the second persons of the Triune God that can be described to us, at any rate, as the relationship between a Father and a Son. Now, for us, a Father gives life to a Son. A father sires a son, a father begets a son, and something like that is said here in v. 26. But it is eternal life and self-existent life that the Father has given to his Son. Hence whatever this relationship is, between the Father and the Son, between the first and the second persons of the trinity, it has always existed; there is never at time, never has been a time, when it was not. *That is what the words eternal and the word self-existent mean!*

This is what was also made clear in the opening statement of the Gospel. The Word *was with God*. In the beginning he was with God. The Word never became, in the sense of coming into being. He always simply *was!* And we get the same emphasis every where else in the Gospel. In the Lord’s great prayer in the upper room, which we’ll get to in ch. 17, the night of his betrayal, he said, “Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you *before the world began.*” And, still more emphatically, on several occasions he takes to himself the great OT title or name for God “I am.” The self-existent one. And, of course, rising above all these considerations is the identification of Jesus Christ with Jehovah, Yahweh, the Lord of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The arguments of Jehovah’s Witnesses notwithstanding, that identification occurs repeatedly in the NT and it occurs also in the gospel of John. In John 12:41 we are told that it was the glory of Jesus Christ that Isaiah saw, when he was given his vision of God in the temple high and lifted up recorded for us in (Isaiah 6) That occurred in the year that King Uzziah

died. But in Isaiah, what Isaiah saw, we are told was Yahweh, Jehovah, the eternal self-existing God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

And, then yet, in v. 30 we finish the section with another of these statements of personal distinctness of submission and obedience to the Father. “By myself I can do nothing...” There is both equality and submission throughout this extraordinarily important section. Jesus Christ is both equal with the Father and separate from him as a submissive Son and servant. Here you and I stand before the deepest things we know or anyone knows, we are peering into the interior life of the eternal and triune God.

In a glorious passage right near the beginning of his immortal *Confessions*, Augustine asks, “Who then are you, my God?” And then he gives this reply.

“What, I ask, but God who is Lord? For ‘who is the Lord but the Lord’, or ‘who is God but our God?’ (Ps. 17:32). Most high, utterly good, utterly powerful, most omnipotent, most merciful and most just, deeply hidden yet most intimately present, perfection of both beauty and strength, stable and incomprehensible, immutable and yet changing all things, never new, never old, making everything new and ‘leading’ the proud ‘to be old without their knowledge’ (Job 9:5 Old Latin version); always active, always in repose, gathering to yourself but not in need, supporting and filling and protecting, creating and nurturing and bringing to maturity, searching even though to you nothing is lacking: you love without burning, you are jealous in a way that is free of anxiety, you ‘repent’ (Gen. 6:6) without the pain of regret, you are wrathful and remain tranquil. You will a change without any change in your design. You recover what you find, yet have never lost. Never in any need, you rejoice in your gains (Luke 15:7); you are never avaricious, yet you require interest (Matt. 25:27). We pay you more than you require so as to make you our debtor, yet who has anything which does not belong to you? (1 Cor. 4:7). You pay off debts, though owing nothing to anyone; you cancel debts and incur no loss. But in these words what have I said, my God, my life, my holy sweetness? What has anyone achieved in words when he speaks about you?” [trans. Chadwick, 1: iv. 4-5]

A Jew in Jesus’ day might have written that, or, at least, something like that. But here is the difference. The God of whom Augustine spoke so eloquently, or rather, that God *to whom* Augustine spoke so beautifully, is known to us, makes himself known to us, in Jesus Christ. For God the Son became a man to show us the Father, as well as to forgive our sins and grant us eternal life. Not the father, but God with the Father equal to the father who can show us the father.

That is the bedrock of the Christian faith: that Jesus of Nazareth was God the Son, that he was God himself, the second person of the one, holy, living, Triune God. John was a monotheist, of course. All Christians are. The Bible teaches us to be in no uncertain terms. There are not three gods there is but one God. What we find in these verses we have read in is what one great scholar calls the “distinctly Christian form of monotheism.” [Lightfoot, *Biblical Essays*, 141 cited in Carson, 250] Jesus is God. It is that conviction, that certainty that makes us Christians. It is the defining truth of our faith and our religion. It is, we believe, the single most important fact in all the world. And because Jesus is God, we can know God and his love and his life

through knowing Jesus Christ. As Augustine wrote on the same text, “show me a flame without light and I will show you God the father without God the Son.”

There is but one God, but the Father is God and so is the Son, and, so we shall discover, is the Holy Spirit. A single name, a single life, baptizing them in the name the singular name, of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, not in the names, but in the name. A single name, a single life, a single deity, but three persons, three centers of self-consciousness, three who in that single God-head can look at one another, can love one another, can sacrifice for one another, can serve one another.

This is a high mystery. We do not deny that. It is the mystery that lies at the center of all existence and all life. But it explains everything. We were made, each and every human being, in the image of this one God who exists in three persons. It is why our life is lived so profoundly in relatedness to others. It is why human beings are creatures in relationship it is the nature of their lives at the deepest conceivable level. We are as our relationships are. Ruined by them, or saved by them. We were made for relationship because relationship lies at the heart of the nature of the eternal God – Father and Son and Holy Spirit. It is why family is so crucial in the life of mankind, for there is a Father and a Son already in the Eternal God-head. It is why the church is a family. It is why the human conscience is always taken up with the questions of our duty to others, always places a premium on sacrifice for others, always sees good largely in terms of how we love, and respect and honor others. For that love, that respect, and that service always and eternally existed in the very heart of the triune God. He never lived for himself, alone, he always lived for himself in relatedness, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is why there is and always will be order in the relationships of human life, why there can never be a total sameness in human living: men and women relate differently; parents and children; bosses and workers; governors and citizens. The great and the small. For that order – exemplified in the Father and the Son exists eternally even perfectly even in equality in the relationships of the Godhead itself. Everything that is truly important, basic, and fundamental about human life goes back to the nature of God as three in one, as a loving fellowship of persons, related to one another in distinct ways within the Godhead. What is the great problem of philosophy? It is the problem of unity and diversity, the one and the many and it all comes back in the very beginning with the nature of God himself, one in three.

This is why we are not Jews, it is why we could never be Muslims. Allah is the holy God, whom Muhammad doubtless intended to be identified with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of the Bible. But he is not that God revealed to us by Jesus Christ, the God the Son who has shown us the father. That God, Allah, is remote. He is merciful and just, to be sure, but he has not come into the world to secure the salvation of his sinful people and offered to them the gift of that salvation, a salvation of which they can be sure and certain. With all due respect, Christians look at Islam and they see it as a kind of monotheism for beginners, purged of all the true complexity and mystery of the nature of God. Purged of everything that explains life as we see it in this world from the nature of God. And there is nothing in it of God drawing near to his people, making himself known to them, by coming among them, even inviting them to struggle and wrestle with him over the great issues of their lives, a struggle so characteristic of Christian experience, precisely because at one and the same time the living God is so far above us *and* so near to us. That is what Jesus Christ means to us; that is what we have found in him.

The knowledge, the loving fellowship, even the kinship of the Mighty God himself. He had it in himself, he brought it into the world, he gives it to us. [Cf. G. Bray, *The Doctrine of God*, 121-122]

We must never allow this grand, mysterious, wonderful, breathtaking fact to recede from the very front of our minds: Jesus is God, the Mighty God, and when we know him we know God himself. And because anyone *can* know him, anyone can know God himself and the life of God can be given to him. Precisely because Jesus is God, he can say, “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.”

Jesus is God! There never was
 A time when he was not
 Boundless, Eternal, Merciful,
 The Son the Sire Begot!
 Backwards our thoughts through ages stretch,
 Onwards through endless bliss, --
 For there are two eternities,
 And both alike are his. [Frederick Faber]

You see how it all ties together. If Jesus is God, -- not god, small ‘g’, not god as the term is often used today, not God as we would speak blasphemy ourselves nowadays about ourselves being gods and so on, but the living, eternal, holy, God who make the heavens and the earth, who gives life to every creature, who judges the living and the dead, – *THAT GOD* – , if Jesus were that God, is that God, then surely his death on the cross is, and must be, the salvation of all who trust in him. And if Jesus is Almighty God, the Son of the Father, who came into the world to do his Father’s holy will, then surely it is the only conceivable wisdom, goodness, good sense, the only conceivable right, for all men and women to love him and obey him, and serve him, especially when he promises eternal life to everyone who believes in him and receives his word. C.T. Studd, the pioneer missionary, put it famously: “If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for him.”