

STUDY 4. God the Son

Four main points

1. Deity and Humanity
2. Humiliation
3. Exaltation and Return
4. Work

1. Deity and Humanity

Reading:

John 1: 1-18; 8:56-59; 17: 4, 5; Matt. 26:63-65
KTT 161–189
H & W 95-97; 100-103

2. Humiliation

Reading:

Phil. 2: 5-11; Heb. 2:9-18; 4:15; Mk. 10:45; Tit. 2:11
H & W 97-99; 103-107

3. Exaltation and Return

Reading:

Luke 24: 36-43; Acts 2:32-36; 1:9-11; Eph. 1:20
H & W 107-112

4. Work

Reading:

Rom. 5:9, 18, 19; Heb. 2:11-18; 4:14; 10:5-10
H & W 105; 112–115

1. Deity and Humanity

Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. Jesus was the name given to the baby of Bethlehem. Christ (meaning 'Messiah'; 'anointed one') is a title rather than a personal name. The Second Person of the Trinity had an existence before Bethlehem. The Eternal Word or the Eternal Son pre-existed. God the Eternal Father and God the Eternal Son exist in fellowship with the God the (Eternal) Holy Spirit. The relationship of father and son is that the son is fathered (or begotten) by the father. Therefore, when we speak of God the Eternal Son, we speak of him as eternally begotten by the Father. This Eternal Generation of the Son is revealed in a special way through the birth of Jesus.

The conception of Jesus Christ was supernatural (Luke 1:26-38; Matthew 1:18-25) but his birth was natural enough (Luke 2:1-7). It is more accurate to speak of the virgin conception than the virgin birth. The doctrinal importance of the virgin conception must not be underestimated. It shows that salvation ultimately comes from God himself (Gal. 4:4-5). It shows how Jesus is fully divine and fully human. It also shows how Jesus can be fully human without inherited (or 'original') sin. Jesus had a human mother, grew up like other boys of his time, and experienced the full range of human emotions and feelings - sorrow, anger, compassion; hunger, thirst, weariness. He was fully human.

Much modern thought accepts Jesus as a great moral teacher and some of the parables (e.g. Good Samaritan) are widely admired. However, it is inconsistent to say that Jesus was only a great moral teacher. His character (his sinlessness and purity); his claims (to be the source of truth and justice and in a unique relationship with God his Father); and his conduct (performing miracles, pronouncing forgiveness and accepting worship) make Jesus either divine or anything but a teacher of morality (because if he was not divine so many of things he said and did were blasphemous, false and misleading).

The relationship between the divine metaphysical attributes and human nature is difficult. There is a sense in which Jesus needed to empty himself of the privileges and glory of divinity without losing the essence of divine nature. Orthodox belief was refined at the early Christian Councils culminating with the statement of the Council of Chalcedon (451), which countered various heresies (e.g. Docetic: Jesus only seemed human; Arian: Jesus subordinate to the Father, not co-eternal; Apollinarian: divine spirit, human soul and body; Nestorian: two natures held apart - double personality; Monophysite: one nature, either a hybrid or playing down the human dimension).

2. Humiliation

The state of Christ's humiliation includes his incarnation, life, sufferings, death and descent to Hades (the world of the dead). The incarnation is the doctrine, which asserts that God took humanity upon himself, and the form of human flesh (John 1:14). This, of course, meant that the Eternal Word had to leave the majesty of heaven (Phil. 2:5-11). He emptied himself of the glories of heaven which could not be comprehended by the human mind or fulfilled by the human body.

The teaching that Jesus was God clothed or veiled in human flesh does not, as sometimes mistakenly assumed, imply docetism. Jesus took on the likeness of sinful mankind (Rom. 8:3), that is he was like Adam (so that he is rightly named 'the second Adam'), as regard to his human nature, fully human and yet without sin. It is important that Jesus was without sin or he could not offer himself as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world (1 Peter 3:18). He was tempted as we are and yet without sin (Heb. 4:15) and is holy, blameless and, as such, separate from sinners (Heb. 7:26; 1 Peter 1:19, 22).

Much of the debate in the New Testament centres on the person of Jesus and whether he was the promised Messiah. There is a latent contrast in the Old Testament between an understanding of the Messiah as a suffering servant and as a glorious king, so much so that some thought that perhaps there would be two Messiahs.

Jesus came proclaiming the Kingdom of God, to fulfil prophecy, to reveal God in both his suffering and his glorification. The coming of God in flesh, in the person of Jesus Christ, was for the purpose of redemption (Mark 10:45; Titus 2:11). Jesus as the 'second man', 'the second Adam', 'the proper man' came in order that he might overcome temptation, be obedient to death, rise in triumph and so pioneer the way of salvation for all who would trust in and follow him. Jesus became the covenant head of a new race of redeemed people (Heb. 2:14-18).

We must not limit the sufferings of Jesus to the last days of his life. His whole life was on the human plane, which is oppressed by suffering. If Jesus has not been tempted and suffered in the fullest sense, if he had been born fully human but preserved in a divinely provided cotton-wool, his humanity would have been hollow. The death of Jesus was for the purpose of being an atoning-sacrifice for sin. Jesus came to be a substitute sacrifice and by virtue of his nature is the one mediator between God and humanity (1 Tim. 2:5). His burial and descent to the abode of the dead enabled genuine victory over these in resurrection.

3. Exaltation and Return

The exaltation of Jesus Christ includes his resurrection, ascension and present heavenly session from which he has promised to come again, not in humility but in glory. Authentic, apostolic proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ centres not only on the death of Jesus Christ but also on the reality of his resurrection.

The resurrection is the vindication of one who was obedient to death. It has a basis in history. The change brought about in the disciples, the failure to produce the body even in the face of the claims to resurrection, the variety of appearances and the survival and growth of the infant Church despite the most severe persecution, all point to something far more considerable than what might be termed 'a resurrection myth'.

Resurrection is more than the survival of the soul, or the persistence of personality. There were things about the spiritual, immortal, imperishable body of Jesus that were different from the physical body but there were things that were the same. The disciples recognised him and touch him. He walked and talked with them. Perhaps most significantly, he ate with them (possibly at Emmaus and certainly in the upper room and on the lakeside at Galilee). This was important to the early mind as ghosts were not considered to have a digestive system and therefore would not have eaten anything. The appearing and disappearing of Jesus before his ascension are perhaps due to the relationship between his immanence and transcendence.

Two great and comforting truths, which are immediately apparent from the resurrection, are God's justice and the hope that death is not the final word. The ascension is necessary to show how the risen Christ left the earth. No other way would seem adequate to deal with the truth that needs to be expressed.

The pattern of death, resurrection and exaltation, pioneered by Jesus is the way in which Christians are now called to follow. With the ascension of Christ we have the promise that he is preparing a place for us. In him we have the assurance of a place in heaven, the eternal Kingdom of God.

The promise of Jesus to come again (John 14:3) includes the ideas of hope and judgment. These are the twin themes of Advent. While in one sense, the coming of Jesus, as the baby of Bethlehem (in humility) was a fulfilment of the scriptural promises, the fulfilment is incomplete. When Jesus comes again in glory ('second coming' is not a biblical expression) the promises will be complete.

4. Work

The work of Christ is often divided into three - Prophet, Priest and King. The Old Testament predicted the coming of Christ as a prophet (Deut. 18:15-18). This is a claim that Jesus takes up. He claims to bring a message from God, his Father, speaks with great authority and acts in a prophetic way. Indeed, he is often recognised by the people as a prophet (Luke 7:16; John 4:19). However, the New Testament letters avoid calling Jesus 'a prophet', presumably to avoid any confusion over his divinity. He was not merely a messenger but the originator or source of the message.

The Old Testament also predicted and prefigured the priesthood of the coming Redeemer. The simplest distinction between prophet and priest is to say that a prophet represents God to the people and a priest represents the people to God. A priest is taken from among people to be their representative, to approach God and to speak and act on behalf of the people.

The New Testament speaks very clearly about the priestly work of Jesus Christ, who brought himself as the perfect sacrifice for sin. The Old Testament sacrifices foreshadowed the perfect and complete sacrifice of Christ (the Lamb of God - John 1:29; the Passover 1 Cor. 5:7). Jesus also makes intercession for the people and continually brings us near to God. He pleads the cause of his people as their advocate. The Jewish high priest was able to enter the holy of holies in the earthly temple but Jesus is able to enter the holy of holies in the heavenly temple (Heb. 6:19-20). On the ground of his self-sacrifice, Jesus claims spiritual blessings for his people and defends them against the onslaught of evil (Rom 8:34). Jesus secures forgiveness from every charge brought against the believer. This heavenly session is the culmination of Christ's work as Redeemer.

The kingship of Christ is simply his royal rule over his people. He is King over the new people of God. It is a spiritual realm established in the hearts and lives of believers rather than spatial realm (John 18:36). After his resurrection, Jesus was given by God the Father, far greater authority both over the church and over the universe (Eph. 1:20-22). His kingdom is in one sense present already as a reality in the hearts and lives of Christian people but, in another sense, it is a future hope that will be realised when Christ returns in glory. On that day, everyone will acknowledge him as King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 19:16; Phil. 2:10).

The study of other work, names and titles of Jesus Christ (e.g. as Shepherd, Apostle, Captain) will assist a fuller understanding of the scope of his grace.