



CAPITOL COMMISSION™

The Image of the Invisible (Colossians 1:15)

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For the interim session, we plan to meet most Wednesdays during the 12noon-1pm lunch hour in House Hearing Room #6. I hope you are able to make many of our studies.

One day Jesus asked those that were following Him, “Who do people say that I am?” (Mark 8: 27). They promptly answered by listing off a number of ideas given by various people. That same question would provide a number of answers still today. Some believe that Jesus was a good man with moral teachings and lifestyle that all people should emulate. Others say he was a prophet in a long line of prophets which came to the highest of prophets, Muhammad. Some believe that he was a man who was so good that he attained God-hood. Others think of him as some poor deluded soul that should be pitied; and still others just see Jesus as a mythological, “Paul Bunyan” type of legend.

Over the next several weeks we are going to look at Colossians 1:15-20. Many scholars believe this segment of Paul’s letter was an early hymn or poem sung by the early church. Other scholars see it as Paul writes concerning the great work of God in our lives that he burst out in praise of the King who accomplished all on our behalf. Regardless of the origin of these words of praise, these lines of Paul’s letter are some of the most sublime words about Jesus Christ.

Colossians 1:15-20 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities-- all things have been created through Him and for Him. ¹⁷He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. ¹⁸He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, ²⁰and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven.

INTRODUCTION

In today’s study we are going to examine the first of Paul’s incredible statements concerning Jesus in verse 15a: *He is the image of the invisible God...*

The word “image” brings the idea of manifestation or likeness. Therefore, Paul is basically saying that Jesus is the visible expression of an invisible God. In other words, when you look at Jesus, you are looking at God. “The very nature and character of God have been perfectly revealed in him; in him the invisible has become visible.”¹

Human beings have been made in the “image” of God. Humans have intellect, emotions, and will. And even though the “image” has been marred with sin, humans never did have attributes such as omnipresence, all-knowledge, perfect holiness, along with many others. But Paul’s claim is that Jesus Christ does since He is “the image of the invisible God.”

This is not the only time Paul or others have made this statement.

John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

Philippians 2:6 ...who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped...

Colossians 2:9 For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form

Hebrews 1:3a And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power.

How can Paul and the others make such a claim? What basis do they draw this conclusion? It is quite fashionable today to say that the deity of Jesus was something foisted upon Him by His loyal followers, even though Jesus never made such a claim.²

Today, I want to lay out the foundation for Paul’s incredible claim--that Jesus is God in the flesh. We could look at what was written about Him (names, titles, attributes), and what others said about Him (John the Baptist, demons, Roman Centurion, disciples, Apostles), and there would be much to write about. But in this study, I want to highlight what Jesus said and did

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which showed His deity. It is true that Jesus never stood up and made the proclamation: "I am God." By examining the gospels, though, one can note that He did make comments and worked actions that revealed His acknowledgement of His divinity.³

THE CLAIMS OF JESUS

"Practically everything Jesus said was an indirect claim to divinity" wrote James Boice.⁴ Throughout His teachings, Jesus made various divine claims. He said He had absolute authority over the laws of God and His institutions. When He stated "you have heard it said...But I say to you..." in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21-48), Jesus exercised His authority over the Mosaic Law. Jesus said that He is greater than the Temple, the center of Jewish worship of Yahweh (Matthew 12:6) and that He has authority over the Sabbath Day (Mark 2:28). These were all things established by God and only God has the right to rule over them.

Jesus stated many times that Yahweh God was "His Father." No Jew in Jesus' day would ever address God as "My Father", but this was Jesus' only mode of talking to or about God. He even taught His disciples to pray "Our Father" (Matthew 6:9).

He also claimed such a unity with God that they were one. He said to know Him is to know God (John 8:19; 14:7); to see Him is to see God (John 12:45; 14:9); to believe in Him is to believe in God (John 12:44; 14:1); to hate Him is to hate God (John 15:23); to honor Him is to honor God (John 15:25) and to receive Him is to receive God (Mark 9:37; 10:40).

In addition to these statements, Jesus gave a number of "I am" statements which promoted Him as the only thing humans needed for a fulfilled and eternal life. These are claims that only God could make. Among these, He said "I am"...the bread of life (John 6:35), the light of the world (John 8:12; 9:5), the good shepherd (John 10:11,14), the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6). Jesus told Mary and Martha, who had just lost their brother in death, *I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die* (John 11:25-26).

During one argument with the Jewish religious leaders in John 8, the leaders retorted with a comment that He is less than 50 years old, and He could not have seen Abraham who lived over 1800 years earlier. Jesus replied to them with the statement, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I

am" (John 8:58). The Jews responded to that by picking up stones to kill Him. Why the violent reaction? They perfectly understood that Jesus was saying that He is God. He applied to Himself the divine name "I AM" that God revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:13-14). In their eyes, He blasphemed and deserved death; in other words, they heard His claim to be God.

THE DEITY OF JESUS IS AN ASSUMPTION UNDERLYING EVERY SENTENCE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT. THE NEW TESTAMENT DOES NOT OVERTLY PROVE THE DEITY OF ITS SUBJECT, IT PRESUPPOSES IT.

--ROBERT CULVER

Jesus claimed to be the true object of saving faith and that eternal life is based upon knowing God the Father and Him (John 17:3; John 3:16); in fact He said "And I will give them eternal life, and they shall never perish" (John 10:28). He told people to come to Him for peace and rest (Matthew 11:28; John 3:38) and that there are to be no other loyalties above Him (Matthew 10:37-39; Luke 14:26). He also claimed to hear and answer prayers (John 14:14). Again, these are actions reserved for God alone; no man has the right or the ability to make these promises.

JESUS' ACTIONS

Jesus' actions throughout His life showed that He knew His divinity. Besides His miraculous works in which He demonstrated His power and authority over nature, sickness, the demonic world and even death, Jesus' other actions also revealed His divine nature.

In healing a lame man who was let down through the roof, Jesus forgave the man of his sins (Mark 2:1-12). This caused quite a stir as the Pharisees rightly thought, "Only God can forgive sins." But since they could not refute the miracle of making the lame man walk, they did nothing about the "blasphemy." He also forgave the sins of a woman who anointed His feet with perfumed oil (Luke 7:37-38, 44-48).

Jesus accepted divine praise and worship. While Peter (Acts 10:25-26), Paul & Barnabas (Acts 10:25-26) and even angels (Revelation 19:10; 22:8-9) refused to receive worship from other men, Jesus Christ never refused

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worship. The disciples worshipped Him saying “Truly you are the Son of God” (Matthew 14:33) and Jesus did not correct them. The Syrophenician woman cried out in worship (Matthew 15:25) and a group of women worshipped on the resurrection morning (Matthew 28:9). The “once I was blind, but now I see” man worshipped the One had healed him (John 9:38).

Jesus did not rebuke Thomas who said to Him “My Lord and My God”; *Adonai! Elohim!* (John 20:28) These two titles were reserved in the Jewish culture for Yahweh God alone. Jesus fully accepted when directed to Him, He did not deny them.

This brief survey of the claims and works of Jesus show that even though, He did not forthrightly proclaim, “I am God”, He did make this indirectly known to those around Him. It is intellectually dishonest to say that Jesus never promoted the fact that He was God.

SO WHAT IS THE POINT?

There are four conclusions one may come to after reading the claims of Jesus. The first conclusion is absolutely impossible. It is impossible to conclude that Jesus was simply a good man, a good teacher, a good role model for the entire world to admire. Why is it impossible to conclude He was a good man, good teacher, and good role model, even though this seems to be the popular conclusion in our society and culture?

Look again at His claims. No good man can claim to be equal with God, if he wasn't. No good man can claim to raise the dead, if he can't. No good man can honestly tell others to put their hope for eternal life in him for he is the Savior of all mankind, if he is unable to give life and to save. These statements would undermine the viable credibility of anything else that person said or did.

And these claims cannot be ignored. We are not at liberty to choose which statements are true and which ones are not; which statements Jesus actually uttered and those that were attributed to Him. For the moment we start that process, it is one person's opinion against another and everyone believes what is right in his own eyes. Thus, no standard for objective truth will be found.

Therefore, C.S. Lewis wrote:

You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool; you can spit at him and kill him for a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. **But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us.** He did not intend to.⁵ (emphasis mine)

Since the first conclusion, though popular, is undefendable. One is left with three other options (brought out by Lewis above).⁶

The second conclusion is that Jesus Christ was simply insane. He was delusional in His own ideas about Himself. Some in Jesus' day thought this and said “You have a demon” (John 7:20). But this position is not viable, though, when one examines the life of Jesus. He was in total control of every situation (including His trial and crucifixion--John 18:4; 19:11). He spoke with quiet authority and never seemed to be rattled. The people around Him were not simply tolerant of the ravings and actions of this “madman”. They were totally for Him or against Him; and this is not the way people normally react to a crazy person.

One cannot easily place Jesus into this classification without doing damage to the text of Scripture. Once again, a person would be forced to choose which events and sayings were from the sane Jesus and those who came from the “insane Jesus.” And if He were insane, it would undermine the “good man” position.

The third conclusion is that Jesus was a deceiver who set out to deliberately fool people. This was one drawn by some who heard Him (John 7:12). But when further thought is given to this position, it also falls short.

First of all, if Jesus was simply fooling people, He was not very smart about it. One does not go into the most rigid monotheistic country in the area to proclaim one's own divinity. Jesus would have been better off going to the polytheistic Romans and Greeks. The claims that He made eventually got Him killed. Secondly, if Jesus was lying, He was also a hypocrite for He told others not to lie--again, thoroughly undermining the position that He is a good man, teacher and role model.

Thirdly, if Jesus was simply a liar, He was also a cold heartless devil. Note James Boice's comments:

Think it through clearly. Jesus did not merely say “I am God” and let it go at that. He said, “I am God come to save fallen humanity;

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I am the means of salvation; trust me with your life and your future.” Jesus taught that God is holy and we are barred from him because we are not holy...he taught that he had come to do something about our problem. He would die for our sin; he would bear its punishment. All who would trust in him would be saved. That is good news, even great news--but only if it were true. If it is not true, then his followers are of all are most miserable, and Jesus Christ should be hated as a fiend from hell.”⁷

But is He a deceiver? Again, closer examination of Jesus’ life of humility, service, love and compassion does not fit the profile of one set out to deceive a nation. It is hard to look at the whole of Jesus’ life and conclude that this man is a liar.

The fourth conclusion one can draw is that Jesus Christ is who He said He was: the great “I AM” who came to give His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). It is thus our obligation to worship, praise, give thanks and submit in repentance and obedience to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

CONCLUSION

How could Paul write in a letter “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation”⁸? He is simply following the teaching of Jesus Himself.

It is this Jesus that Paul proclaims to have been the One which God the Father worked through so that one may be qualified to receive the inheritance of the saints (Colossians 1:12), and be rescued from the tyranny of darkness and settled into the peaceful and safe kingdom of His Son (1:13). It is this Jesus who gave His life so that one may be redeemed from the shackles of sin (1:14). It is only through this Jesus that one can have his or her certificate of debt, owed because of sin, to be paid in full (2:13-14).

highlighted those associated with the “Jesus Seminar”—a group dedicated “to discover and report a scholarly consensus on the historical authenticity of the sayings and events attributed to Jesus in the gospels.”

³ One may interject here and say that the four Gospels of the New Testament are not reliable documents and thus nothing in them can be considered accurate. A complete answer to this is beyond the scope of this study. A quick answer, though, is that there are plenty of sources that show and prove the reliability of the Gospel records; i.e., *The Case For Christ* and *The Case for the Real Jesus* by Lee Strobel; *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* Volume 1 & 2 by Josh McDowell. These are just a few of the many--technical and non-technical-- works which one can consult to see this argument doesn’t hold true.

⁴ James M. Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 273.

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 41; cited in Boice, 276. Boice also notes John Stott: “The claims are there. They do not in themselves constitute evidence of deity. The claims may have been false. But some explanation of them must be found. We cannot any longer regard Jesus as simply a great Teacher, if he was so grievously mistaken in one of the chief subjects of his teaching, namely himself.”

⁶ An excellent resource covering this subject is the short book by former atheist Josh McDowell called *More Than a Carpenter*. In this classic work, McDowell addresses the claims of those who believe Jesus was not the Son of God, but simply a good man and moral teacher.

⁷ Boice, 277.

⁸ More will be discussed on “firstborn of all creation” next week. It should be obvious that if we conclude like Paul that Jesus is God, then the next phrase cannot mean that Jesus was the first thing created as held by the Jehovah Witnesses. The Greek word translated “firstborn” means “first in rank” or the one who has the “right of inheritance” regardless of position of birth.

¹ Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 44 (Waco, Texas: Word Publishing, 1982), 43.

² A number of theologians and “biblical” scholars believe that the disciples of Jesus are to blame for the deification of the man, Jesus. The disciples had such a high admiration for Jesus that the oral stories handed down over the years were embellished to the point of miraculous, “God-like” actions. Thus, it is the duty of people today to peel back the layers of legend to get to the actual words and work of Jesus. And if one does that, he or she will find the true “historical Jesus”—a Jesus that one can still honor as a great selfless man of moral character, but a person who was not “God”. These ideas were