

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Nicene Creed		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	17		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Matthew 16:13-21		
Date:	June 30, 2024 (a.m.)		

BEGOTTEN, NOT MADE

Athanasius (297-373 AD) is rightly considered one of the greatest Christian theologians. C. S. Lewis called Athanasius' work on the incarnation one of the greatest books ever written.¹ When speaking of the ways Scripture refers to the non-communicability of the names of "Father" and "Son" is based both on the intractable givenness of the scriptural patterns of naming and on the understanding, consequent upon these patterns, that the act of generation to which these names refer does not partition the divine nature so that the name of "Father" is partially owned by the Son, and vice-versa, Athanasius wrote: "God is not like a human being (Num. 23:19), nor does he have a partitioned nature. Therefore, he does not beget the Son by way of partition, so that the Son may also become father of another, since the Father himself is not from a father. Neither is the Son a part of the Father. Therefore, he does not beget as he himself was begotten, but is whole image (*eikon*) and radiance of the whole. It is only in the Godhead that the Father is properly (*kyriōs*) Father and the Son properly Son; in their case, the Father is always Father and the Son always Son. Just as the Father could never be Son, so also the Son could never be Father. And just as the Father will never cease to be uniquely Father, so also the Son will never cease to be uniquely Son. So it is madness to speak and even to think in any way of a brother of the Son, and to name the Father a grandfather."² The church has always affirmed that the Jesus Christ of history was at the same time truly God. Paul proclaimed that "Christ . . . who is over all" is "God blessed for ever" (Rom. 9:3, 5). And in Col. 2:9: "In him the whole fullness of Deity dwells bodily" (cf. Col. 1:15). In 2 Cor., Paul speaks of "the power of the Lord who is the Spirit" (3:18) and "the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (4:4 cf. 4:6). In 1 Cor. 2:8, Paul describes Jesus as "the Lord of glory," which is tantamount to acknowledging his Deity. John confesses, "The Word became flesh; he came to dwell among us, and we saw his glory, such glory as befits the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth" (Jn. 1:14). In 1 John, Christ is described as "the true God and eternal life" (6:20). And in Revelation, he is exalted as the "King of kings and Lord of lords" (19:15). Other texts that explicitly refer to Jesus Christ as God include Matt. 4:7; Lk. 4:12; Jn. 20:28; Titus 2:13; Heb. 1:8; and 2 Pet. 1:1. In addition to the direct affirmation, "There is," observes Ramm, "an abundance of indirect evidence for the Deity of Christ. Even if the direct appellations of Deity to Christ are overstatements, the indirect evidence is not, such as the worship Jesus received, his authority to forgive sins, his preexistence, and his claim to have power in himself to perform miracles."³ While the New Testament indeed teaches the Deity of Christ, it also insists on his true humanity. According to Paul, Jesus was: "born of woman, born under the law" (Gal. 4:4). God sent his Son "in the likeness of sinful flesh" (Rm. 8:3; Phil. 2:7). The author of Hebrews refers to Christ as "one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (4:15). The sinlessness of Jesus is pictured as a result of conscious decision and intense struggle rather than being a formal consequence of his divine nature (Heb. 4:15; 5:7-9; 12:2-4). He "became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:8). In the words of the Apostles' Creed, he "was crucified, dead and buried."

- I. **THE ETERNAL SON.** Phillip Cary makes this crucial observation: "The first thing the Creed is saying when it contrasts begetting and making, therefore, is that the origination of the Son of

God is more like something coming to be by nature than like something coming to be by art. The Creator of heaven and earth can be compared to an artist who makes all things well, by skill and wisdom. This is how *all things, visible and invisible* came to be. But it is not how the Son has his being from the Father. He is not one of the things God made; he is the natural-born Son of the Father, his only-begotten. Together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, he is, to use the technical term introduced in the discussion of the first article, *uncreated*. It turns out that the word *created*, used in older translations (*begotten not created*), is also a technical term in theology. As Christian theology has traditionally used the term, creating is a unique kind of making, and only God can do it. Human beings make many things, but in the Bible and the traditional vocabulary of Christian theology, only God *creates*. Only God the Creator makes things out of nothing, needing no materials to work with. A human artist makes a pot out of clay or a house out of wood, but God is an artist who makes both pots and clay, houses and wood, and every element and particle that the clay and the wood are made out of. As Maker of all things, he cannot possibly have materials to work with except what he himself has made. He is the only Creator, the only Maker who makes things out of nothing. All things, visible and invisible, are his creation, and everything that has being, other than the Creator himself, is his creature. Every being is either creature or Creator, and there is no third category. What the Creed is saying in this phrase is that the eternal Son of God does not belong in the category of *creature*. He is not on the list of *all things* that God has made. As we saw in the first article of the Creed, he is not creature but Creator, just as truly as God the Father is. His role in the work of creation is different from the Father's, and we shall get to that shortly. And of course, when he becomes incarnate and is born of Mary, he does become a creature – and thus is the only being who is both creature and Creator in one. But right now the focus is on his being as Creator rather than creature, his divine nature rather than his human nature. With that focus in mind, we can extend our answer to the child's question: *Who created God?* The answer is that no one creates God. Not even God can create God. However, God can beget God – and he did.”⁴

II. **THE SITUATION AND JESUS' INTERROGATION.**

- A. **The situation** (Matt. 16:13). The retirement to Caesarea Philippi afforded our Lord opportunity to ask two questions. *First*, what did the people think of Him? And, *second*, who did the disciples think He was? H. P. Liddon, in his masterful study on the Deity of Christ, wrote, “When then Jesus Christ so urgently draws the attention of men to His Personal Self, He places us in a dilemma. We must either say that He was unworthy of His own words in the Sermon on the Mount, or we must confess that He has some right, and is under the pressure of some necessity, to do that which would be morally unsupportable in a merely human teacher. Now if this right and necessity exist, it follows that when our Lord bids us to reconsider His Personal rank in the hierarchy of beings, He challenges an answer. Remark moreover that in the popular sense of the term the answer is not less a theological answer if it be that of the Ebionitic heresy than if it be the language of the Nicene Creed. The Christology of the Church is in reality an integral part of its theology; and Jesus Christ raises the central question of Christian theology when He asks, *Whom do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?*”⁵
- B. **The interrogation** (13-15). The text calls His companions, “disciples,” but from the accounts it appears that the revelation and the teaching given at this time were given only to the apostles. Playing an important role in the conversation here is Peter, who has been called “the American of the apostles,” no doubt because he was always, it appears, putting his foot in his mouth!⁶ We are inclined to think of the great Apostle as a colossal blunderer (cf. 17:1-11, 24-27); 18:21-22; John 13:1-10), but we must remember that it is our Lord who said to him, “Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona” (v. 17). He addresses him by his full Jewish name. *Bariōna* has been frequently translated as “son of Jonah” (as in the NIV), but this would

contradict John 1:42 and 21:15 unless Simon is simply seen as a spiritual son of Jonah. It is better, therefore, to recognize that the Greek spelling is a legitimate transliteration and abbreviation of *bar Johanan* ("son of John"). Jesus' calling Peter "son of John" nicely balances Peter's address to his Lord as "Son of God." Jesus attributes to Peter's confession insight stemming from divine revelation rather than human deduction. The language does not specify how God revealed himself nor does it require some sudden flash of insight, but it does affirm that God has led Peter to his correct understanding. "Man" is literally *flesh and blood*, a stock Semitic idiom for mortal humanity."⁷

1. *THE INTERROGATION OPENS WITH A GENERAL QUESTION* (13-14) addressed to the disciples, "Who do men say that the Son of man is?" It seeks an evaluation of what men in general have placed upon the identity of the Lord Jesus. It is, "Who do *men* say that the Son of man is?" The answers are probably to be understood as "three specimen answers," typical of the kinds of answers that were being given by those who, unlike the leaders, were trying to put Him in the context of the biblical revelation in a serious way.
 - a. The *first* was the view that Herod had espoused when he said that he was John the Baptist risen from the dead. There were similarities between John and Jesus, for both had official positions in the messianic program, but there the likeness fades, and the superiority and uniqueness of the Son become evident, as John himself admitted (cf. John 3:30). John, the ambassador, was an agent in the preparation of men for repentance, but Jesus was the King who could give it.
 - b. The *second* suggestion also points to certain similarities between the great prophet and Jesus, for the Son was the greatest of the line of the prophetic messengers of God. Elijah and He were both men of prayer, men of miracles, and warriors for the truth in conflict with false prophets. Elijah, however, wavered in his faith, but Jesus never did. Elijah won man of his victories by shedding the blood of others, but Jesus won His by shedding His own blood.
 - c. The *third* suggestion is not surprising, and it is the opinion of more than one that Jeremiah, of all the Old Testament prophets, was most like our Lord. He was a living example of patient endurance and of suffering for the truth he proclaimed. And he came to be known as "the weeping prophet." The picture he presented reminds one of the Suffering Servant of Jehovah, the Lord Jesus, of whom Isaiah speaks in this way, "He is despised and rejected of men, *A Man of Sorrows*, and *acquainted with grief* (Isa. 53:3). A true likeness existed between them, but there it ends – with a *likeness*. For while Jeremiah had prophesied of a New Covenant to come, it was the Man of Sorrows who inaugurated that New Covenant in His blood, obtaining the forgiveness of sins for His people.
2. *THE INDIVIDUAL QUESTION* (15) naturally follows, for general answers do not suffice for Him, and so He replies, "But who do *you* (the word is emphatic in the Greek text) say that I am?"
 - C. *The Confession of Peter* (16). The only adequate answer is Peter's. "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Peter knew that He was not just another of the prophets, important though they were. He sensed that He was the Messiah, and that Messiahship was grounded in an even deeper relationship to Jehovah. He was the Son of the living God, who knew the inmost thoughts and purposes of the Father and possessed His essential nature. This insight probably did not come to Peter like a bolt from the blue.⁸ Stonehouse comments, "In Peter's confession we are invited to observe then, not a new objective revelation, but genuine subjective apprehension. And even this apprehension is not clearly intimated to be a completely new apprehension. The fundamental contrast of the narrative is not between the

disciples' previous lack of apprehension and their suddenly bestowed understanding, but between the inadequate and erroneous estimates of men, who held that he was at best one of the prophets, and the evaluation of his disciples who belonged to the inner circle and who had eyes to see and ears to hear (Mt. 16:13ff; cf. 13:11-17).⁹ "It was," Calvin adds, "a brief confession, but one which contains the whole sum of our salvation."¹⁰ In its ultimate bearings it contained all the Messianic work that leads to His eternal Kingdom with its subjects, the saints of God. Reymond rightly contends, "I would urge that by his confession Peter self-consciously intended, as the result of the Father's revelatory activity, to affirm full, unabridged Deity to Jesus as *the Son of the Father*, and that Jesus, by declaring him in making such a confession to have been directly blessed by his Father, tacitly claimed to be God incarnate."¹¹

CONCLUSION: Buddha and Confucius, Zarathustra and Muhammed are indeed the first confessors of the religion founded by each of them, but they are not themselves the content of such religion. Their connection with it is in a sense accidental and external. Their religion could remain the same even though their name should be forgotten, or their persons be supplanted by others. In Christianity, however, all this is very different. Christianity stands in a very different relationship to the person of Christ than the other religions do to the persons who founded them. Jesus was not the first confessor of the religion named after His name. He was not the first and the most important Christian. "He occupies a wholly unique place in Christianity. He is not in the usual sense of it the founder of Christianity, but He is the Christ, the One who was sent by the Father, and who founded His Kingdom of earth and now extends and preserves it to the end of the ages. Christ is Himself Christianity. He stands, not outside, but inside of it. Without His name, person, and work there is no such thing as Christianity. In one word, Christ is not the one who points the way to Christianity, but the way itself. He is the only, true, and perfect Mediator between God and men. That which the various religions in their belief in a mediator have surmised and hope, that is actually and perfectly fulfilled in Christ."¹²

ENDNOTES

- ¹ cf. his *Introduction to Athanasius: De Incarnatione Verbi Dei*, translated by Peneiope Lawson (rpt. GLH Publications, 2016).
- ² As cited in Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Baker Academics, 2011), p. 140. As a side note, Mormons do claim that the Son had a brother -- Lucifer.
- ³ B. Ramm, *An Evangelical Christology: Ecumenic & Historic* (Thomas Nelson, 1985), p. 41.
- ⁴ P. Cary, *The Nicene Creed: An Introduction* (Lexham Press, 2023), pp. 74-75.
- ⁵ H. P. Liddon, *The Divinity of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1978), p. 6.
- ⁶ S. Lewis Johnson, *The New Testament Revelation of the Messiah* (Believers Bible Bulletin, 1982), no. 14, p. 4.
- ⁷ Cf. C. L. Blomberg, *Matthew: The New American Commentary* (Broadman, 1992), p. 251.
- ⁸ "In the first place, Peter's confession is represented as the result of a strictly supernatural revelation given him by God; not "flesh and blood," that is, not man, not human nature, has led Peter to make this confession, but the Father of Jesus, and more particularly the Father in heaven, which stresses the revelation-origin of Peter's confession still more strongly. The verb "has revealed" reminds me of Matt. 11:27, where it is said that only the Father knows the Son, and where the context represents it as the exclusive work of the Father to reveal the Son. If this reminiscence is not accidental, we shall have to infer that Jesus finds here a concrete instance of such revelation by the Father of His unique sonship. Peter is one of the simple and unwise ones to whom it is the Father's good pleasure to reveal the truth concerning Jesus. The phrase "my father," instead of "God," also suggests that the disclosure made to Peter had reference to the paternal and filial relationship between God and Jesus. Even if the higher sense of a super-Messianic sonship were not required by the resemblance of the train of thought to that of chapter 11, we should still have to say that, considering our passage by itself, the mere fact of Jesus' Messiahship could scarcely have been represented by Jesus as requiring, in the case of Peter, such a strictly supernatural revelation for its knowledge and acceptance. The ordinary means of self-disclosure during our Lord's long association with Peter would have sufficed for the basis of a mere confession of Jesus' Messiahship." G. Vos, *The Self-Disclosure of Jesus* (P&R, 1953), p. 179.
- ⁹ N. B. Stonehouse, *The Witness of the Synoptic Gospels to Christ* (Baker, 1979), p. 216.
- ¹⁰ Calvin's *New Testament Commentaries II* (Eerdmans, 1972), p. 187.
- ¹¹ R. L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nelson, 1998), p. 285.
- ¹² Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith* (rpt. Baker, 1977), p. 281.