

Who Was Jesus?

There have been reports in the newspapers and over the radio concerning the publication in 1977 of a book in Britain called "The Myth of God Incarnate". The contributors to the book are described as seven leading British theologians, among them the professors of theology at Oxford and Birmingham Universities. Their argument, as reported, is that though Jesus was 'possibly the most wonderful human being ever' He was not God and did not present Himself as such. One of the contributors is quoted as saying that all theologians accept the central themes of the book which, he said, "aimed to bring this consciousness gently and responsibly to Christians to enable them to maintain their faith in the light of modern scientific and philosophical developments." (*The Australian* 29.6.77)

One thing is certain and this is that what the book is saying - that Jesus was just a man - is not new; and, useful as this kind of thing can be, what the book will probably do is serve to open up a controversy which has from time to time surfaced in the Christian Church from very early times. The Council of Nicaea, held in 325 A.D., was called expressly to counter the spread of this idea, but it has always been there. The book will have served a use if Christians everywhere are caused both to re-think their beliefs about the Lord and to re-examine the teachings they hold in faith about Him.

Because of the importance of our religious beliefs and the influence which these exercise over us, I would like to take up this question, Who was Jesus? How am I to think of Him? And what of the trinity? For if the identity of Christ is called into question so is the existence of the trinity. Is there a trinity? And how am I to think of that? These people have called into question the orthodox teaching on both of these subjects, as indeed it needs to be, but the conclusions they come up with, are by no means the only ones available to us.

The first and the most important question, then, is this: Who was Jesus? If we accept that He was the Messiah, as He claimed to be, let us look at what is said of His Coming in the Old Testament, particularly in *Isaiah*. "Behold" he wrote "a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call His name, Immanuel" (that is, 'God with us') (Chapter 7,14) Again, "And it shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for Him, and He will save us: this is Jehovah; we have waited for Him, we will

be glad and rejoice in His salvation." (Chapter 25,9) And one further example, "The voice of him that cries in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God... Behold, the Lord Jehovah will come with strong hand, and His arm shall rule for Him. (Chapter 40,3) The consistent declaration of Messianic prophecy, you see, is that God Himself, Jehovah, would come into the world. There is no reference anywhere to anyone else being involved.

The confusion starts when we come to the New Testament where on the one hand there are things said which bear out the prophetic anticipations of the Old Testament and are entirely in accordance with them, and, on the other hand, things which don't. "Before Abraham was" Jesus said "I AM" (*John 8,58*) And no one knew better than the Jews just what He meant when He said this. When Moses asked the Lord what was the name of the God of Israel he was told that the name was "I AM" - meaning the Divine Being Itself. (see *Exodus 3,14*) Jesus was claiming to be the Divine Being Itself and the Jews, seeing this, sought to stone Him for blasphemy. Yet again, and a little later, Jesus said, "I and my Father are one" and the Jews, knowing perfectly well what He was saying, that He was God Himself incarnate, "took up stones again to stone Him." (*John 10, 31,32*) And then there are the Lord's well known words spoken to Phillip in answer to his question, "Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" (*John 14, 8,9*)

There are, however, other passages which speak of Jesus and of the Father as if they were two separate entities. Jesus tired and hungered, for example. He prayed and at times spoke of the Father as someone separate from Himself. And these are the passages which have opened the door to confusion entering in. These are the passages upon which are based the orthodox teaching of a trinity of three co-equal Persons in the Godhead. These are also the passages which contributors to the book I have talked about have taken up as demonstrating the point of view they hold.

The truth is as the Old Testament prophecies anticipated, that the one God Himself became incarnate by birth of the virgin Mary. The Creator of the universe, as it is said, 'put on' human nature as being the most effective and at the same time the most merciful means available to Him to overcome the power of evil from hell which was then threatening mankind. "Jehovah the Creator of the universe" wrote Swedenborg,

"descended and assumed the Human, in order to redeem and save mankind." (*True Christian Religion* 81) As in the words of *Isaiah*, His name was to be called "Wonderful, Counsellor, The Mighty God, The everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace." And this is who He was. Not only the Prince of Peace, but also the Mighty God, and the everlasting Father.

God Himself was incarnate in Jesus Christ. He did not send another, for there was no other to send. He came Himself. As Jesus went on to say to Phillip, the Father dwelt within Him. In a very real sense it was as the relationship of the soul to the body; a relationship of which at times the Lord was fully conscious, and would talk about it, and at other times, He was not so conscious, not so aware, not so confident. At those times, He spoke of the Father as someone separate from Himself. Then it was, also, that He prayed to the Father. Then it was that the hells could draw near and tempt Him, which they would otherwise never have been able to do. For a great deal of His life on earth Jesus was in obscurity as to just who He was, and this had to be. Otherwise He could have made no contact with the forces of evil then threatening mankind, and overcome them.

God our Creator, our Father in the heavens, took on frail human nature in order to be present more closely with mankind, a human nature which could be tempted and which could be, as it was, made Divine. Throughout the whole of His life on earth this process of glorifying or making Divine the human nature He had assumed was going on. For a time there was a sense of separation between the two, between God and Jesus, the Divine Being Itself and the Human He had put on; but in the end this was no longer so. Who else but God Himself could say, as Jesus said after His resurrection, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth"? (*Matthew* 28,18)

What then of the trinity? Does it exist? And if so, how are we to think of it? You will find it helpful, perhaps, to stop and think for a moment of the trinity which exists within every individual of soul, body, and outflowing life and influence. Each of us is only one person and yet made up of these three essentials. Similarly with God. God is one in whom also there is a trinity of essentials. There is the Divine Soul which we otherwise know as the Father, the Divine Body referred to as the Son, and the Divine operation and influence called the Holy Spirit. Clearly, and by way of an analogy, we can understand what is involved. It does not have to be a mystery and beyond the level of human comprehension.

Nothing is proven about the identity of Jesus and this is the way it has to be. There has to be room for doubt and for rational consideration of what is involved. The contributors to the book I have mentioned are arguing one particular point of view and, in this talk, I have presented another. It is up to the individual to decide which is the more reasonable; which best fits the realities as we know them; which is more likely to be so. Everyone of us must be prepared to give the matter the thought which it deserves. And it is important that we do so, for the belief we have about God, and the concepts we have of Him, more deeply influence us than we realize. Thought about God, Swedenborg wrote, occupies the highest regions of our minds and cannot but have an impact on everything else that goes on there. (see *True Christian Religion* 43)

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The teaching concerning the Lord which has been presented in this talk has been drawn from the theological works of Emanuel Swedenborg. One of his smaller works, called *Doctrine Of The Lord*, is recommended for further reading.

This book can be downloaded from http://www.swedenborg.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/swedenborg_foundation_the_lord.pdf

We stress the importance of the subject. If you would like to purchase or borrow *Doctrine Of The Lord* call the Swedenborg Centre on (02) 9888 1066.

The Swedenborg Centre, is situated at 1 Avon Road, North Ryde NSW, Australia.

Also recommended is the talk given by Dr Jonathan Bayley, titled '*How to Think of the Divine Unity and Trinity*'. The link is

<http://www.biblemeanings.info/talks/bayley1.html>

The Swedenborg Programme – Number 113.

<http://www.swedenborg.com.au>