

# Truly God

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Littlebourne - 3rd December 2023 - Isaiah 9:6, Hebrews 1

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Today marks the first Sunday of Advent - the beginning of the weeks leading up to Christmas where we think about and celebrate the coming into the world of Jesus Christ. One of the aspects of this that we're going to look at over the next couple of weeks is the Incarnation - how is it that the eternal God took on human form, how does that work, what pitfalls are there in understanding this?

But let's start with some church history. We don't celebrate the feast of Saint Nicholas in Britain, but in parts of Europe, this week people will be celebrating this feast, exchanging gifts and remembering a caricature of Saint Nicholas, on the anniversary of his death, the 6th December.

Saint Nicholas was a real person - bishop of Myra in the fourth century, and he was known for his generosity - especially toward children - for his gift giving. He's the origin of Santa Claus, Father Christmas.

But the other thing that he is famous for, is for punching the heretic Arius square in the face.

Arius was an elder at the church in Alexandria. In the third century, there was much debate about whether Christ is truly human, but in the fourth century, the debate turned to whether Christ is truly God. Arius took the position that Christ was not truly God - not of one substance with the Father and the Spirit.

In the year 325, Constantine, emperor of Rome, assembled a council in Nicea to sort this out - the city of Nicea was used by emperors at the time as a sort of equivalent to Camp David, or Chequers. It was a place away from the bustle of the capital, and Constantine has his summer palace there.

More than three hundred bishops and church leaders from all around were gathered there to sort out the issue of whether Christ is of the same substance, similar substance of different substance to the Father.

Arius, in all probability really believed the Son is heteroousios - that is, of a different substance. Hetero meaning different, opposite, and ousia meaning essence, or substance. At the council he toned down his views a little, seeing where such a position would leave him.

But the debate at the council came down to a debate between two words with a single letter of difference - homoousios - of the same essence - and homoiousios - of similar essence. Literally one iota of difference, but with very serious consequences.

Anyway, the great Athanasius led the fight for orthodoxy, arguing that the Son is homoousios, that He really is God, just as much deity as the other persons of the Trinity, and Arius argued for the homoiousios position, that Christ is of similar nature, but not the exact same.

At some point in the middle of all this, Saint Nick strides across the floor, up to Arius, and decks him. He receives a short prison term, followed by a pardon from Constantine.

## Doctrine

The words of the resulting Creed that the council of Nicea produced clarify the position they came to. They start like this:

*We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible.*

*And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father [the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God,] Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father;*

*By whom all things were made [both in heaven and on earth];*

*Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man;*

The result was an agreement - in a statement that unites Protestants and Catholics, East and West, to this day, that Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, not only is God, but always has been God, and is the creator of all things. He's not half God, or partly divine, nor did he start being God at some point. He became man, but He is eternally God.

## Isaiah 9:6

Long before the Son took on human flesh, in the Incarnation, Isaiah was inspired by the Spirit to write these words (Isaiah 9:6):

*For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given,  
and the government will be on his shoulders.  
And he will be called  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

It's hopefully a familiar verse - a Christmassy passage. Christians have long thought that this passage applies to Christ - hopefully that part I don't need to explain to much.

A child is born, and I understand that the Hebrew verb here used is just as ordinary as it appears in English - an ordinary human birth. But the word for given is different - indicating that He who is born already existant. This One was truly a child, born as children are, and also the Son, come to redeem us.

The verse is also most definitely messianic - look at the next verse (Isaiah 9:7):

*Of the greatness of his government and peace  
there will be no end.  
He will reign on David's throne  
and over his kingdom,  
establishing and upholding it  
with justice and righteousness  
from that time on and forever.  
The zeal of the Lord Almighty  
will accomplish this.*

This is the one that sits on David's throne forever - the Messiah. So everyone that is anywhere near Orthodoxy can all agree that this is talking about Jesus Christ. It tells us what He will do, which is indicative of His being the Christ.

But back to verse 6, we see before what He does, what He will be, who He is. It says that He will be called 'Wonderful Counsellor', 'Mighty God', 'Everlasting Father', 'Prince of Peace'.

The two of these titles we'll look at more closely are His being the Mighty God, and Everlasting Father - one speaks to Christ's deity, the other might trip us up.

## Mighty God

The Hebrew words for Mighty God are 'El Gibbor'. Now those that deny Christ's deity typically take one of two routes to deny that this is saying that Christ is truly God. First, they could point out the word Gibbor is used in many other places in the Old Testament, typically for heroic figures, but most definitely for ordinary humanity. Well it says El Gibbor, which is not something that is applied to any mere mortal.

Second, they make the claim that this doesn't speak so much of Christ's full deity, but rather speaks of Christ being some kind of god, a powerful being, but not the Almighty God. That's what you'd get from for instance a Jehovah's Witness - they think that the Son is 'a god', but not 'the God' - for them, he's the nearest thing to the true God, but still a created being.

But either approach runs in to a problem - a problem for them written by Isaiah a chapter later - in Isaiah 10 verse 21:

*20 In that day the remnant of Israel,  
the survivors of Jacob,  
will no longer rely on him  
who struck them down  
but will truly rely on the LORD,  
the Holy One of Israel.  
21 A remnant will return, a remnant of Jacob  
will return to the Mighty God.*

Notice there that the LORD is capitalised - meaning that this is a translation of the proper name for the only true God - Yahweh, or however you wish to pronounce it. Here, the name 'Mighty God' - 'El Gibbor' - is referring to the one and only true God - the Messiah, the Christ, is the LORD Yahweh.

We also see the name El Gibbor appear elsewhere in scripture - Dueteronomy 10:17, Jeremiah 32:18, Nehemiah 9:32, Psalm 24:8 for example. And in fact, in all of Isaiah, the name El, with various adjectives, is used only for the one true God.

So this nice Christmas verse we have points us directly to the truth that God Himself came in human form.

## Everlasting Father

Now I said the next one could trip us up - 'Everlasting Father'. The everlasting part is fine. This could apparently be alternatively rendered 'Father of Eternity'. We believe that the second person of the Trinity, the Son, is everlasting - He has always been and always will be. That He is the Father of Eternity speaks to His deity, His status as creator.

But it's that word Father - we can misunderstand the relationship between the persons of the Trinity if we're not careful here - the Father did not come to Earth and live a human life. Only the Son was incarnate. We can easily read our New Testament knowledge back onto what Isaiah is writing and think we're seeing that we're seeing two persons of the Trinity being interchanged.

However, Jesus Christ is certainly father-like, and with the title of Everlasting Father, we can take from this that He will never stop being father-like towards His children. What we shouldn't do is take this verse that doesn't clearly speak to the relationship of the persons of the Trinity and think it speaks more clearly about such things than those verses we have that do - the persons of Father and Son are clearly differentiated in scripture. At Jesus' baptism for example, or in Jesus' prayers.

## Hebrews 1

Another place we might look at the deity of Christ would be Hebrews chapter 1. Beginning at verse 6:

6 And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says,

*“Let all God's angels worship him.”*

7 Of the angels he says,

*“He makes his angels winds,  
and his ministers a flame of fire.”*

8 But of the Son he says,

*“Your throne, O God, is forever and ever,  
the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom.*

*9 You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;  
therefore God, your God, has anointed you  
with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.”*

10 And,

*“You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning,  
and the heavens are the work of your hands;*

*11 they will perish, but you remain;  
they will all wear out like a garment,*

*12 like a robe you will roll them up,  
like a garment they will be changed.*

*But you are the same,  
and your years will have no end.”*

The author of Hebrews starts his sermon - for that's what it seems this book really is, it's not a letter, or a historical account, but a theological exposition, focussing on other scripture - he starts with an exposition on the Son of God - particularly how the misconception that Son of God could be a mere creature is not supported by the evidence.

Let's briefly skip through these scripture references in these 6 verses.

## Verse 6

*6 And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says,*

*“Let all God's angels worship him.”*

The first scripture that is quoted is from Dueteronomy 32:43, or could be from Psalm 97:7. Let's look at what Psalm 97 says:

*1 The LORD reigns, let the earth rejoice;  
let the many coastlands be glad!*

So we're seeing this is about the LORD - Yahweh, the only true God.

*6 The heavens proclaim his righteousness,  
and all the peoples see his glory.  
7 All worshipers of images are put to shame,  
who make their boast in worthless idols;  
worship him, all you gods!*

So here, the author of Hebrews is saying that the Son is to be worshipped, and worshipped in the way that the true God is worshipped - that He is to be worshipped above all others - that the angels are to worship the Son as they worship the Father.

## Verse 7

*7 Of the angels he says,*

*“He makes his angels winds,  
and his ministers a flame of fire.”*

This verse sets up the contrast to the Son in verse 8 - these angels, these mere creatures, are fleeting and ethereal.

## Verse 8-9

*8 But of the Son he says,*

*“Your throne, O God, is forever and ever,  
the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom.*

*9 You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;  
therefore God, your God, has anointed you  
with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.”*

The Son is eternal - His throne is for ever and ever, quoting Psalm 45. The only one whose throne could possibly be eternal is the creator of all things - the one and true God.

## Verse 10-12

*10 And,*

*“You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning,  
and the heavens are the work of your hands;*

*11 they will perish, but you remain;  
they will all wear out like a garment,*

*12 like a robe you will roll them up,  
like a garment they will be changed.*

*But you are the same,  
and your years will have no end.”*

Lastly, the author of Hebrews quotes from Psalm 102. This, he makes out, is written about the Son.

Turn to Psalm 102 and take a look at what it says - there is no way that this is not talking about Yahweh. In the context of the passage, it's very clear that this is all about the one true God, and here, it's applied to the Son.

(This is a good one for Jehovah's Witnesses, but make sure you do Psalm 102 first, so they agree that this is about Jehovah before we see it applied to Christ).



## Why does this matter?

We could look at a great many scriptures about this topic, and if you're interested, then a great book on the subject is this - *The Forgotten Trinity*.

But it's one thing to understand that Jesus Christ is God, even that He's truly God, of the same essence as the Father. But what does it matter?

## Salvation

Maybe the most important difference this makes is to the nature of salvation. If Jesus is not fully God, then what salvation is to be found in his death? The sacrifice of one man, no matter how innocent, would not cover the sins of many. More is required. The sacrifice that accomplishes the redemption of the whole of God's people, and the world from the clutches of sin, is one that could only be provided by God Himself.

Christ is described as our mediator - He stands between God and men, interceding and mediating salvation to us. But this is so effective, because Christ is both God and man - this isn't like an earthly priest, who must elevate himself, or more likely humble himself and plead for mercy - no, Christ has the direct line to the Father that nobody else could, and as our representative, as a man, He makes our case better than we could ourselves, He the perfect man and perfect God.

## Worship

Another way in which this doctrine affects us greatly is in our worship. I don't know how much you think about the songs we sing, but one thing we do is sing a lot about Jesus. We worship Him. We pray to Him. We treat Him as if He is God, rightly so.

And this informs not just what we do now, but what we do in eternity to come. If we understand that a very important theme of the New Testament is to be 'in Christ', that union with Christ is what actually matters, then we can see that our eternity with Him is going to be quite different than if we're united to just some "Adam 2.0, managed to stay innocent this time round, kind of guy". It's the difference between the Jehovah's Witnesses view of everlasting life, which looks like a Norman Rockwell painting with the addition of tame animals, or the kind of thing we read about in Revelation:

(Revelation 7:9-12)

*9 After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, 10 and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" 11 And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12 saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."*

Our view of who Christ is, especially if we are those who profess to be united to Him, will change everything about our present and future existence.

## **Conclusion**

The deity of Christ has been something that the church has defended since its very beginning, and as disputes arose about what exactly the situation was, the church has found clarity through scripture about the exact way that Christ is God. It's something that really matters.

Disputes over Christ's nature didn't end in the fourth century, they continued into the fifth, with, amongst others, the council of Chalcedon, where the arguments moved on to the exact nature of Christ's humanity as well - was Christ really a proper human too? Was he really one of us too? Can the second person of the Trinity really be one of us as well? Next week, the plan is to look at how Christ, who we understand is truly God, is likewise truly human, and why that matters.