

CONNECTIONS BETWEEN INTERPERSONALISM AND CHRISTOLOGY

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Scripture makes clear that Jesus the Messiah possessed deity in the distinctive, ontological sense. From the standpoint of theory, it may not contradict the salvation enterprise for us not to understand that fact fully or with complete accuracy. His sinlessness relative to God's will for him in the flesh appears to be the essential element for salvation purposes. It would be best, then, not to regard as "enemies of Christ" those who misperceive him as the first created being (who created everything else, Colossians 1:15-16) yet affirm his sinlessness and everything scripture says about him.

He obviously functions as deity and has the status and prerogatives of deity since scripture uses the term "God" in reference to him. Besides, there is no basis for affirming his createdness. The situation seems comparable to some Old Testament statements about the angel of the LORD. Some people even suppose that they addressed pre-incarnate manifestations of the Messiah.

We may not need to know that someone is a president when he tells us that such and such is wrong, will happen, or should be understood in a particular way. We need not know everything about someone to believe or be helped by that person in telling us something or doing something for us. Such considerations apply to the gravity of errors about Christology and the personality of the Holy Spirit.

Christology may have some flexibility in that Christ as person redeems us from tradition and the rigidity of law. He "redeems" us in these ways because he opens up to us the full range of positive expression. He left the heavenly realm to inhabit the physical—a most extraordinary demonstration of flexibility.

Emphasizing character and behavior relative to God makes Christological issues less rigid than they have sometimes been treated in church history. We probably cannot understand, say, how divine spirit differs from angelic spirit (if it does differ in any way but authority and ability). We wonder whether the same might be said about modern examples of Arianism. There is a truth here, but honest error on it may not make the system unworkable as long as it retains the human sinlessness of Jesus Christ and the other characteristics scripture clearly attributes to him.

These concessions for the sake of Christian unity, however, have to keep certain safeguards in mind. There is (a) the difference between fellowship and leadership as well as (b)

the difference between honest error and fomenting division by trying to promote that belief in the body (note Romans 16:17). (c) It takes both sides of the disagreement to maintain relationship. There is a self-cleansing process when the variance is too great for practical purposes, as John noted in 1 John 2:18-19: "*They went out from us because they were not of us.*" For practical purposes, groups that differ significantly may find themselves grouping separately and relating on occasion to the extent of common ground.

Finally, comments here assume that the leadership and the majority of the fellowship occupy the dominant ground. When that is not the case, not much can be done but maintain lines of communication and keep motives and attitude from impacting the situation any more than necessary. What applies to Christology applies all the more to less central features of the faith.

From this point, then, the study needs to move on to the information that clarifies the deity of Jesus Christ, as presented elsewhere in these essays.