

Jesus
of Nazareth
IS HE REALLY
**GOD'S
SON**

WILLIAM M. BEAN

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Larry Deason has been proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ for 40 years. He has served the Body of Christ as deacon, elder, preacher, missionary, counselor, teacher and writer.

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While doing mission work in New Zealand Larry co-founded and taught for four years at the Tauranga Two-Year Bible School. He also co-founded and directed the Northeast School of Biblical Studies where he taught for 12 years. He also consulted in the establishing of the South Pacific Bible College in New Zealand. Larry has been a guest lecturer each year for the past 23 years at the South Pacific Bible College.

Larry Deason has written more than 20 booklets, books and in-depth study guides. These books have been distributed in all the states in the USA and in more than 70 nations worldwide including China, Eastern Europe, and Russia.

Larry and his wife Helen have been married for 50 years. They have two daughters, five grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

Larry Deason continues to do mission work, present his seminars and distribute his books worldwide.

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“If Jesus does not reveal to us the truth about God and about ourselves, can we ever really hope to know truth?”

*“No single proposition about Jesus
can better summarize
the message of salvation in him
than his own claim to be
the Son of God.”*

THE ISSUE

Some issues in life are too important to sidestep with a lot of fancy double-talk. When a man who can become hungry and weary, who is subject to temptation, suffering, and death like the rest of us, also makes a straight-faced claim to be *the* (not merely *a*) Son of God, we must decide whether that man is a liar, a lunatic, or the Lord of Glory.¹ If his claim is false, he must be a deliberate fraud, a demented madman, or a deluded idiot. If his claim is true, it must surely be accompanied by sufficient evidence to convince rational human beings of its validity. Our responsibility in deciding what to do about a man's claim that he is God is almost as momentous as the claim itself.

The idea of a great moral teacher saying what Christ said is out of the question. In my opinion, the only person who can say that sort of thing is either God or a complete lunatic suffering from that form of delusion which undermines the whole mind of man. If you think you are a poached egg, when you are looking for

a piece of toast to suit you, you may be sane, but if you think you are God, there is no chance for you.²

But did Jesus of Nazareth actually make such claims? Or was he perhaps misunderstood by his “muddleheaded disciples”? Could it be that, as on other occasions, they had simply missed his point? Or are those theologians correct who say that Jesus was, 2 after all, simply a man of great personal magnetism and wonderful spirit who taught a simple gospel about the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of mankind? Perhaps the legend of “Jesus the God-Man” grew, as they tell us, from a gradual accumulation of theological overstatements by well-meaning but misguided devotees like the apostle Paul.

Before we go much further, let us clearly understand that there is no way to avoid what Wilbur M. Smith called “the supernaturalness of Christ” when we read the record of his life in the New Testament.

Albert Schweitzer effectively ended all hope of ever finding a purely naturalistic Jesus in the New Testament with his work, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906). His effort to separate the “original” naturalistic Jesus from the supernatural mythology that had supposedly accumulated around him resulted in a complete disappearance of Jesus from the New Testament. So we are left with a dilemma: either we completely lose Jesus as an historical figure, or we accept the supernatural presentation of him that we find in the New Testament—the only real historical source material we have concerning the life of Jesus.

3

The impact of Jesus of Nazareth upon world history makes it rationally impossible to completely deny his historical existence. One might sooner deny the existence of Alexander the Great or Julius Caesar. But the only Jesus known to history claimed to be the Son of God.

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven" (Matt. 16:13-17).

4

"All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matt. 11:27).

"I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.... For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him. I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life" (John 5:19, 21-24).

"For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:40).

"I and the Father are one." Again the Jews picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus said to them, "I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?"

"We are not stoning you for any of these," replied the Jews, "but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God." Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your Law, 'I have said you are gods'? If he called them 'gods,' to whom the word of God came—and the Scripture cannot be broken—what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, 'I am God's Son'?"

(John 10:30-36)

Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" "I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." The high priest tore his clothes. "Why do we need

any more witnesses?" he asked. "You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?" They all condemned him as worthy of death (Mark 14:61-64).

The Jews insisted, "We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God" (John 19:7).

It was not "blasphemy" for a man to claim to be the Messiah; indeed, the Jews were anxiously awaiting the Messiah's arrival, that he might deliver them from political oppression. The charge of blasphemy was related to the *kind* of Messiah Jesus claimed to be: the very Son of God. Only the most willfully ignorant could maintain that Jesus understood himself to be merely a man, or that his contemporaries thus understood his claims. That Jesus was truly a man is beyond dispute, but that he likewise claimed the status and prerogative of Deity is equally certain. It will not avail to deny the value

and credibility of our historical sources concerning Jesus in the New Testament. Not only do these accounts claim to depend on the reports of eyewitnesses, but, as one of the world's foremost authorities on the New Testament manuscripts has said:

8

*"The interval...between the dates of original composition and the earliest extant [New Testament manuscript] evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established."*³

Legends, like certain varieties of garden vegetables, require both hospitable soil and a sufficiently long growing season. There simply wasn't enough time between the

Christ Event itself, and our earliest New Testament evidence bearing witness to that Event, to believe that this thoroughly supernatural God-Man could have grown from an ordinary human story, no matter how much theological fertilizer may have been applied to it. It must also be remembered that no harsher soil could be imagined for the cultivation of any "God-Man" mythology than first century Judaism. There were few things that a Jew of that particular era would have been less likely to believe than that a man should be worshipped as the incarnation of Israel's God. Yet, all of the first Christians were Jews.

9

ROADBLOCKS TO BELIEF

But can sophisticated modern people be expected to subscribe to a belief system that took root in the prescientific world of the ancient Jews and Romans? There are several major hurdles that must be cleared by

modern truth seekers if they are ever to seriously consider the claims of Jesus. For example: Does God exist? If so, is God to be identified with the Deity presented in the Bible? Could God actually become a man? Why would he do such a thing? And, in fact, did he?

10

From the Christian's perspective, none of this is merely of academic concern. Christians believe that there is an infinite and yet personal God who created all things, and made mankind uniquely in his own image; that is, God made man to be a *personal* being with whom he could share life, love, and communication. Part of the true personhood of man is his power to decide whether to find his life's meaning and purpose in a relationship of love and trust in God, or else to center his existence in his own desires and abilities.⁴ Each one of us confronts this 'fundamental option': God-centeredness, or self-centeredness? Christians believe that, as a whole, mankind has chosen the latter course; men and women have followed the

lead of Adam and Eve (who had themselves followed the lead of Satan) in revolting against God. This decision has resulted in disaster for the entire human race and for everything which God originally placed under man's dominion. Man's free choice to center his existence in himself is the primary sin from which all particular 'sins' are born. This primary sin has separated man from the divine source of his physical, psychological, and spiritual life; it has cut him off from personal relationship with God. It has also resulted in a cosmic struggle between God (the source of love) and Satan (the source of self-centeredness) for the souls of individual men and women. Jesus, according to biblical teaching, was sent into the world by God the Father to save the church (collectively) and the individual sinner (personally) from the destructive power of sin and death:

But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he

might taste death for everyone.... Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death (Heb. 2:9, 14-15; compare 1 Cor. 15:56-57; Rom. 8:1-4).

- 12 The human individual is infinitely valuable because of being created in the image of God, and because he or she is the reason why the Son of God was born into the world as a man, died on a Roman cross, and rose from the dead.

The victory that God won over sin and death through the sinless *doing* and the sacrificial *dying* of his Son must be accepted by simple faith (trust) if the individual sinner is to be restored again to an unbroken relationship with God. As you and I once followed the way of Adam and Eve by ceasing to trust God, turning away from him to “do our own

thing," we may now (by the grace of God extended to us in his Son) choose to *reverse* that decision. We may now trust God to restore us back to himself through the reconciling power of his Son's death and resurrection on our behalf. By dying on the cross, Jesus has totally paid the cost of our sinful rebellion against God; by rising from the tomb, Jesus has conquered the power of death that threatened to forever cut us off from God. In turning to the crucified and risen Son of God for salvation from sin and death, we are at the same time turning to him for guidance and power to live a life of love and trust in God.

13

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls (1 Peter 2:24-25).

Through the sinless human life, sacrificial death, and glorious resurrection of God the Son, Satan's reign of sin and death has been completely undone; all that remains is the final revelation of what God has already accomplished in his Son when Jesus returns at the Last Day. However, by deceiving the minds of individuals, the spiritual powers opposing God can prevent people from trusting in this Good News of salvation.

14

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God (2 Cor. 4:3-4).

We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one. We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may

know him who is true. And we are in him who is true—even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life (1 John 5:19-20).

Through his hold on those who control the educational, political, and cultural institutions of this world, Satan manipulates the minds of people, keeping them from believing the truth that could set them free from his control. He does this by continually reinforcing certain lies that dominate the lives of men and women. The overall effect of this ideological bombardment is a kind of spell or trance that only the revealed truth of God can break.

15

These diabolical deceptions, on which the whole structure of modern secular life is built, have grown into a kind of monotonous monster, a Goliath who shouts intimidating and blasphemous slogans day in and day out. Let us consider three of his most effective intimidations:

"CHRISTIANITY IS A RELIC FROM A PAST ERA"

16

To a generation reared on the motto, "new and improved," the connection of thought is all but irresistible: whatever is old is obsolete. History is marching forward—always toward the better, but never quite reaching "the best." Presumably, at some point in the future, today's science and philosophy will be as obsolete as yesterday's now appears to be. The practical effect of this first great pronouncement is expressed in its logical implication:

"THERE ARE NO ABSOLUTES"

In the absence of any real absolute standard by which to define, evaluate, and distinguish between different phenomena, there can be only arbitrary definitions, values, and distinctions. All values and knowledge become

relative. One person's kindness may be another's idea of cruelty; one society's barbarism is another's concept of justice. That which is socially repugnant today could well be the accepted norm tomorrow—and who is to say whether or not it should be? Through constant bombardment with conflicting public opinion polls, shifting popular survey results, and ever-revised "expert testimony," we are being unwittingly programmed to regard all truth as relative and tentative. There is no longer any real right or wrong, no longer any clear line between truth and non-truth; there can be only what is "politically correct" or "incorrect" at any given historical moment. This means that whoever is smart enough and strong enough has an incontestable right to dominate the less clever and weaker elements in society. The strong may do as they please with the weak, without concern about moral censure, because the words "right" and "wrong" have lost all real meaning. They cannot be measured in a test tube or observed under a microscope; therefore, they are meaningless

“god words.” All such talk implies an absolute standard, for which we would need a revelation from a god such as the one described in the Bible: a God both infinite (absolute; unlimited; not dependent on anything outside himself) and personal (having a moral character and the ability to communicate with man by using words). But modern people tend to think that divine revelation is impossible because of the third great pillar of secular humanism:

18

“NATURE IS THE SUM TOTAL OF REALITY”

Like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, we have been told to “pay no attention to that man behind the curtain,” lest we should remember that the man who is now making this *absolute* pronouncement about the ultimate nature of all reality is the same man who just finished telling us that there are no absolutes. We instinctively want to ask him,

"Are you *absolutely* certain that there are no absolutes?" You see, the structure of modern secular thought, which at first appeared so impressively invulnerable, is actually a tottering mass of irrational self-contradiction: a philosophical tower of Jell-O. If the whole universe is merely the result of "chance" occurrences, then all human thought (being merely another random expression of mindless natural forces) must surrender any claim to being a "true" description of reality.

19

We must not allow ourselves to be distracted by any semantical sleight of hand whereby illusions of purpose and design are smuggled into the materialist's absurd, accidental universe. Without a Personal Creator, the cosmos can have no design; without design, the cosmos can have no objective purpose. If nobody designed my senses to perceive or my mind to think, then any slightest resemblance between my personal understanding of reality and real-

ity as it actually exists must be purely accidental and coincidental.⁵

As C. S. Lewis once observed, one might sooner expect that an accidental milk spill would produce an accurate map of the city of London than to expect an undesigned brain (being programmed through undesigned sensory equipment) to form a valid impression of objective reality.

20

All that I have been trying to say up to this point is intended to open modern ears to hear, clearly and without prejudice, the staggering claim that Jesus repeatedly made whenever he presented himself as the Son of God. On the lips of anyone else, such claims would be taken as good evidence of insanity or moral depravity. But from the mouth of one whose psychological health and moral purity shine like the midday sun in the midst of our own delusions and depravity, these claims cannot be so lightly dismissed. If Jesus had been the product of

an Eastern pantheistic culture or mystical mind-set, it might be possible to understand his claim to be God's 'son' as simply another affirmation of the spark of divinity within every person. But Jesus and his original audience (both his friends and his enemies) were strict monotheists whose God was not to be identified with the universe, but was rather its transcendent and personal Creator. In claiming to be the Son of God, Jesus was using a term filled with content from Hebrew history and culture.

21

***"SON OF GOD": OLD TESTAMENT
INSIGHTS AND NEW TESTAMENT
DEVELOPMENTS***

To the biblical Hebrew, 'sonship' ideally meant *loving obedience* and *respectful submission*. The nation of Israel was itself called God's 'son':

"Then say to Pharaoh, 'This is what the LORD says: Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you, "Let my son go, so he may worship me'"'" (Exod. 4:22-23).

"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son" (Hosea 11:1).

22 The Hebrews were responsible to obey God, not only because he had created the universe, but also because he had created them as a nation, delivering them from foreign domination and adopting them as his own covenant people. The kings of Israel not only stood before God representing the nation as a whole, but also representing the reign (kingdom) of God over his people. So, alongside the idea of the whole nation being God's son, there developed the idea that the king of Israel was God's son, embodying the rule of God among his people. God spoke to King David concerning his son, Solomon:

"I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men'" (2 Sam. 7:14).

All the anointed successors to King David's throne were likewise called sons of God, as is made plain in this psalm, celebrating the coronation of the new king of Israel:

23

"I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill." I will proclaim the decree of the LORD: He said to me, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. You will rule them with an iron scepter; you will dash them to pieces like pottery." Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in

a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him (Ps. 2:6-12).

24

It takes little imagination to see how Christian theology, claiming inspiration by that same Holy Spirit who had spoken through the Old Testament prophets, saw in Jesus Christ the perfect fulfillment of all that God had looked for in both the nation Israel and its anointed kings. The nation as a whole had been utterly faithless in failing to submit lovingly and obediently to God, but Jesus is the embodiment and new beginning of the true Israel of God. He obeyed his heavenly Father with perfect trust and love, even to the point of death on a cross for man's salvation. Even the best of Israel's kings had failed to perfectly reflect and uphold the righteous rule of God over his people in the world, but Jesus so perfectly surrendered himself to the Father that the will of God was completely revealed in his teaching and life.

But the apostles and prophets in the early church (especially Paul and John) came to realize that much more was involved in Jesus' claim to be the Son of God than merely a Jewish messianic meaning. Mature theological reflection, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, made it clear that Jesus had...

... "brought His sonship with Him from heaven." Thus Jesus Himself understood fully His own nature as well as His mission, but the relationship of His person and Messianic mission did not come clear to the disciples until after His resurrection. As Son of God, Jesus fulfilled the mission of the Father in complete obedience. He was the long-awaited Messiah, but Messiahship did not make Him the Son nor vice-versa. He was both Messiah and Son in the uniqueness and absoluteness of His relationship to the Father. It was by reason of His Sonship that He was qualified for His office of Messiah. Messiahship of the type He fulfilled in His incarnate life called for One who was truly and specially a Son.⁶

Before the resurrection, Jesus' disciples could speak meaningfully of him as the 'Son of God' in the limited sense of meaning that he was the promised Messiah who would fulfill and embody the ideals of what it means to be God's chosen people and God's anointed king:

26

Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel" (John 1:49).

On the other hand, it is obvious from the nativity narratives of Matthew and Luke, as well as from the prologue and discourses of the Gospel of John, that Jesus was the Son of God in a way that transcended all of the understandings and expectations of even his closest disciples. The purpose of God in sending Jesus into the world was much

broader than could be comprehended in merely nationalistic terms. The promised Messiah was to be not only the Son of David, but also the eternal Son of God: God, the Son. The salvation which God was to accomplish in his Son was not merely a political deliverance of one nation from its Roman overlords, but a spiritual deliverance from demonic enslavement for the whole human race.

27

So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world. But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father" (Gal. 4:3-6).

For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.... And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross (Col. 2:9-10, 15).

- 28 No mere man would be adequate to break the chains of sin (self-centeredness) and death that bound mankind to an existence of hopelessness, anxiety, and insecurity. In realizing the eternal nature of Jesus' sonship, the apostles now had a category for interpreting the nature and mission of Jesus which would enable them to meaningfully share the gospel with the world that lay beyond first century Judaism. Paul is the great apostle through whom the mystery of sonship in Christ is most clearly and thoroughly revealed.

SONSHIP AND “INHERITANCE”

One of the most fundamental ideas associated with sonship in biblical thought is that of *inheritance*: the estate and/or blessings handed down from father to son. Since God is Creator-Father, all blessings, both material and nonmaterial, must flow from him; in the words of famous hymn, “Praise God, from whom all blessings flow.” God created mankind to reign with him over the created world in a subordinate position:

29

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves on the ground” (Gen. 1:27-28; compare Gen. 2:19-20; Ps. 8).

When mankind fell from a right relationship with God through Adam's sin, the human race also found itself in a changed relationship to the created order. Although man still (in some sense) reflected the image of God and was still responsible to act as God's representative in caring for and using the created order, sin and its attendant curse of death brought major complications and problems into the picture. For one thing, the will of sinful man was no longer naturally inclined to submit to the will and purposes of the Creator, and so man now tended to exploit and abuse created things to further his own self-centered ends. As for nature itself, it would no longer automatically cooperate with its human overlord; since humanity was no longer in harmonious relationship to the Creator, neither would the created order readily submit to mankind:

To Adam [God] said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' cursed is the

ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return....So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken (Gen. 3:17-19, 23; compare Rom. 8:18-23).

31

Because God is love, he had already determined from “before the foundation of the world” that he would act to save his human creatures from the sin and death that he knew they would choose. In order to do this, the Creator-Father must become the Redeemer-Father: the human race would need to be created all over again in order to regain its status of sonship under God. Within the eternal Being of God, that Person we know as Jesus of Nazareth has *always*

existed in a relationship of submission and love with that Person whom he taught us to call “Father”:

“Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world” (John 17:24; compare John 1:1-18; 8:58; 17:5; Phil. 2:6-7; Heb. 1:1-3; 10:5-7).

32

It is crucial to understand that God the Son is in no way inferior to his Father in the nature of his *being*; he is every bit as much Eternal Deity as is the Father. To illustrate the point: my son’s *human* nature is equal to my own, even though he derived his life through me. If we were to live for a thousand years, my human nature would never be superior to his—but I would never cease to be “father,” and he would never cease to be my “son.” Because he is truly God, what Jesus has done on our behalf is nothing less

than the saving action of God himself. And because Jesus is truly man, we can share in the blessings of his eternal Sonship by joining our human nature to his own. When our human nature is joined to Christ's, it is completely destroyed and re-created in union with his own death, burial, and glorious resurrection.

To be "born again" simply means to be incorporated into this new creation, to become a part of this new human race that God has founded in his Son, Jesus of Nazareth.

33

Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.

For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be rendered powerless, that we should no longer be slaves to sin... (Rom. 6:3-6; compare Gal. 2:20; Col. 3:1-11; 2 Cor. 5:17).

34

And what do God's sons and daughters inherit in Christ? Their legacy is nothing less than God himself: all that God *is*, he is on behalf of his children. The God of Abraham becomes *our* God; the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ becomes *our* Father in union with him.

... "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward" (Gen. 15:1; compare Eph. 1:3-14; 3:2-6).

God is the Provider of his people's needs, the Forgiver of their sins, their Protector and Champion who conquers all their enemies, including the ultimate enemy: death itself.

...in these last days [God] has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe....It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking. But there is a place where someone has testified: "What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the angels; you crowned him with glory and honor and put everything under his feet." In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him. But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering. Both the one who makes men holy [Jesus, WMB]

and those who are made holy [sons of God in union with Jesus, WMB] are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers....Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death (Heb. 1:2; 2:5-11, 14-15; compare Rom. 8:15-25; 1 Cor. 15:20-28; 1 Peter 1:3-6).

36

Without God, it doesn't really matter what else we may gain in this world; we will lose it all through death and decay, along with our own souls.

In Christ, the children of God inherit an eternal kingdom, a new heavens and new earth in which only righteousness can dwell:

"The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil....Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear" (Matt. 13:41, 43; compare 2 Thess. 1:6-10).

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?

The gospel of Jesus Christ calls for a response of obedient faith from those who have turned away from trusting God and who now stand alienated from the only real source of meaning and standard of truth: God himself. No single proposition about Jesus can better summarize the message of salvation in him than his own claim to be the Son of God. We have already seen that this claim means that all of Israel's hopes and ideals are summed up in Jesus; we also understand that this title, Son of God, implies that Jesus was born into the world as a

human being who personally and perfectly represents God to the human race. In other words, Christians believe that Jesus, in his own person, perfectly embodies the two distinct natures of Deity and humanity. The Son of God has permanently united the natures of God and man by taking upon himself a human nature through the virgin Mary, living a sinless life (a life of uninterrupted obedience to the Father), dying a sacrificial death (to deal with the cost of human guilt before God), and rising from death to glorious immortality. Because of his true humanity, Jesus could rewrite the history of the sinful human race by virtue of his own unbroken relationship of love and trust toward the Father. He could succeed in living as man before God, where Adam, the nation Israel, and all the rest of us have utterly failed to please God with our lives. Jesus did all of this as one of our own kind, as our representative. He even died as one of us, receiving in himself the suffering and death entailed in our rebellion against God. He did this, not of necessity or compulsion,

but "as a volunteer in our miserable regiment." And because he is truly God, Jesus' death has unlimited power to absorb human hostility toward God and fellowman, and to pardon our offenses against God, whose love we have selfishly mistrusted and spurned:

Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:7-8).

39

For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:3-4).

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree" (Gal. 3:13).

40

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant (Col. 1:21-23).

But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered

death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.... Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death (Heb. 2:9, 14-15).

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed (1 Peter 2:24).

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 4:9-10).

Despite the individual peculiarities of expression used by the New Testament writers to describe the meaning of Christ's death, they speak with a splendid monotony on the subject: the forgiving, reconciling, redeeming, restoring love of God himself is made manifest and available to condemned sinners in the death of his Son. When the time came for the early church to grapple with the theological implications of what the New Testament says about Jesus, the church fathers concluded that (1) Jesus was one person having two distinct natures (fully God and fully man), and (2) God is a unity of Being in a plurality of Persons (Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). The spiritual descendants of those early heretics who denied the true humanity and/or the true deity of Jesus are yet with us; their teaching implicitly denies the central truth of the gospel message that Jesus perfectly represents man to God, and God to man:

...God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:19-21).

43

Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son (2 John 7-9).

44

Before one decides to reject this message of God's love and forgiveness, he or she should fully understand what is at stake. By refusing to accept the forgiveness that God is extending to us exclusively in the gospel, we are deciding to live life without God. We are choosing to advance toward our graves with no hope of acquittal before the final judgement of God, despite all that God has done to save us. We are planning to spend the rest of our lives calling God a liar, charging Jesus with blasphemy, and affirming the verdict of those who said, "He must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God." We are rejecting the only way that God has provided, or ever could provide, for us to be at peace with him, with ourselves, and with our neighbor. We are turning a deaf ear to God's Final Word to us, spoken in the person of his own Son in order to save us from the ultimate disaster awaiting all who set their wills against the sovereign purpose of God.

If Jesus of Nazareth is not the Way, the Truth, and the Life, then where can we ever hope to find it? If Jesus does not reveal to us the truth about God and about ourselves, can we ever really hope to know truth? Serious atheists know better than to entertain such a thought; men like Friedrich Neitzche and Bertrand Russell have come to understand that there is only one serious contender against nihilism and despair in the modern world, and that is the biblical presentation of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. They usually don't waste much time opposing any other form of theism. The mystical religions don't even pretend to be rationally defensible. Pantheism, in which God is thought to be identical with the whole universe, leaves us with no way to distinguish good from evil; after all, "God" (the universe) contains both! There are a few variations on these religious systems that might be considered, such as the idea that the universe is in the process of *becoming* God ('process theology'), or that God *inhabits* the universe as a man's spirit inhabits his body ('panentheism'); but these

kinds of religious faith are too abstract and philosophically complex to really influence the masses of humanity, and they also contain logical and internal inconsistencies.⁷ The miserable failure of Marxist communism (the most popular and influential form of materialistic ideology in the twentieth century) only underscores the fact that Judeo-Christian theism, coming to its fulfillment in the revelation of Jesus as the Son of God, is our only real alternative to darkness and despair. Just as we should count the cost

46 before we decide to follow Jesus as Lord and Savior, we should also seriously consider the horrible price to be paid by anyone who chooses to turn away from him in unbelief. When Simon Peter was confronted with the possibility of turning away from Jesus, he immediately grasped the enormity of the issue:

... “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68).

“CAN I REALLY BE EXPECTED TO BELIEVE THIS?”

The Bible not only teaches that we are *capable* of coming to a rational, whole-hearted belief in Jesus as the Son of God, but also that we are being held *accountable* to do so:

47

Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. When the other disciples told him that they had seen the Lord, he declared, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.” A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see

my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!” Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name (John 20:24-31).

We are responsible to weigh the historical evidence provided by the New Testament witnesses and to determine whether that evidence is sufficient to warrant our trust in Jesus as the Son of God who can give us eternal life. It is important to understand that the Bible does *not* say that miracles prove the existence of God. The biblical miracles *presuppose* the existence of God. If there were no God, there could be no mir-

acles; in the same way, if there is no God, he cannot have a Son! It makes no sense at all to say, "There is no God, and Jesus is his Son." Miracles alone prove neither the existence of God, nor the deity of Jesus. Christianity is more than simple theism (belief in the existence of God), but it certainly *implies* theism. Whoever rejects the existence of God cannot rationally believe that any event could be a real miracle, nor that God could dwell among us as a man.

49

Manifestly, if miracles cannot prove God, they cannot prove that a particular man is God....Christ did not claim miracles as proof that He was God. He did cite miracles as evidence that He was authenticated by God and was a messenger to be believed (John 10:38). Since this trustworthy messenger from God said that "he who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9) and "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30), we know that this trustworthy messenger of God

is, indeed, God. In this indirect way the miracles prove that Christ is God, but by itself the fact that Christ does miracles is not immediate proof that he is God.⁸

We might argue that God did not provide sufficient miraculous credentials to confirm Jesus' claim to be his Son, but the Bible affirms that the proofs given are sufficient:

50

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name (John 20:30-31).

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—the gospel he promised

beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom. 1:1-4).

As the physical birth of Jesus is clear evidence of his human nature (through the family line of King David), so his bodily resurrection from the dead is an irrefutable declaration by God the Father that Jesus is his own Son. The power of God might be aped by devious frauds up to a certain degree, but there comes a point when even the deceivers themselves can no longer deny the uniqueness of truly divine power:

The magicians said to Pharaoh, “This is the finger of God.” But Pharaoh’s heart

was hard and he would not listen, just as the LORD had said (Exod. 8:19).

52

Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, "This man is the divine power known as the Great Power." They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his magic. But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw (Acts 8:9-13; compare Dan. 2:1-11, 26-28; Mark 13:22-23; 2 Thess. 2:8-12; Rev. 13:1-4, 11-14).

Let us remember that the miraculous signs done by Jesus, which climaxed in his own predicted resurrection from the dead, did not *in themselves* prove him to be the Son of God. Rather, these were the seal by which God the Father authenticated the claims and teachings of Jesus, endorsing his claim to be the unique Son of God. Other prophets had performed undeniably miraculous signs which had certified them as God's true servants, but none had ever claimed to be the Deity Incarnate. By empowering Jesus with inimitable signs and wonders, through the anointing of his Spirit, God the Father personally stamped his seal of approval upon every claim Jesus made:

Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you." He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.

For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth (Matt 12:38-40; compare Matt. 16:1-4, 21; 17:9, 22-23; 20:17-19; 26:32; 27:63).

54

Then the Jews demanded of him, "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." ...But the temple he had spoken of was his body (John 2:18-19, 21; see also John 10:17-18; 16:16).

We must carefully notice two important considerations: *First*, It is not wrong to ask for evidence when confronted with supernatural claims. The greater the claim, the greater the nature of the evidence required to substantiate it. The problem with the requirement of the Pharisees that Jesus perform miracles on demand was their implica-

tion that all the healings, exorcisms, nature miracles, and raisings of the dead which he had already performed were inadequate. Those who believe every proposition put to them from whatever source without ever hesitating to ask for a reasonable degree of evidence are *not* the kind of people the Bible calls "believers." Because we are not to walk by sight does not necessitate the conclusion that faith must be blind and irrational. Jesus never said, "Blessed are the brain-dead, the gullible, the naive, the pigeons, the suckers, and the dupes." But neither did he commend the cold-hearted skeptics, stiff-necked bigots, compulsive infidels, and knee-jerk nihilists. Thomas was not wrong for requiring some evidence that Jesus was physically alive after his death on the cross; he was wrong because he refused to accept the sufficient evidence of unanimous eyewitness testimony from trustworthy colleagues, especially in light of the repeated predictions of the resurrection which he had heard from Jesus himself.

Second, Jesus' prediction that he would rise from the dead within a specified period of time was common knowledge among both his friends and his enemies. The tomb was sealed and guarded for that very reason, to prevent a fraudulent claim of resurrection which would confirm Jesus' claim to be Israel's promised Messiah and God's own Son. For his own generation in history, and for all time, Jesus staked everything on one great and ultimate sign: his own predicted resurrection from a brutal and indisputable death. If this resurrection could have been prevented or discredited by the people of the first century, it would have been the end of the whole Jesus-movement. If the resurrection of Christ could somehow be disproved today, this would likewise destroy the whole structure of biblical Christianity:

And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we [apostles] are then found to be false witnesses about God,

for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead.... And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep [died] in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.... And as for us, why do we endanger ourselves every hour? ...If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus for merely human reasons, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die"

(1 Cor. 15:14-15, 17-19, 30, 32).

57

First century Christians could not afford the luxury of an irrational or merely sentimental religiosity. Their baptism into Christ publicly marked them for persecution and even death as religious heretics and political subversives. They stood on the only ground solid enough to sustain them through such hardships: the historical certainty of Christ's bodily resurrection from the dead. They entertained no romantic notions of there

being anything salvageable or redeemable in Christianity “even if the resurrection of Jesus never took place.” The stakes were too high for playing such games. Someone once said, “Find the body of Jesus, and the discussion is over.” Paul would have agreed.

58

“Christianity does not hold the resurrection to be one among many tenets of belief. Without faith in the resurrection, there would be no Christianity at all. The Christian church would never have begun; the Jesus-movement would have fizzled out like a damp squib with his execution. Christianity stands or falls with the truth of the resurrection. Once disprove it, and you have disposed of Christianity.”⁹

The historical resurrection of Christ is God’s authenticating sign that he has spoken his final word through his Son.

GOD'S FINAL WORD: THE GOSPEL OF HIS SON

The resurrection of Jesus confirms his claim to be the ultimate revelation of God to mankind, that final standard by which all of us must one day be judged:

59

"Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:29-31).

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven (Heb. 1:1-3).

60

By exalting the Crucified One from the dust of death to the summit of glory, God the Father has demonstrated before men and angels that Jesus of Nazareth is his own beloved Son, in whom he is well pleased. Our human nature, corrupted by sin and death through Adam, has been completely restored and renewed by the perfect submission of Jesus to his heavenly Father. By his obedience even to the point of death by crucifixion, Jesus has won the acceptance of

God on behalf of all who will trust in him as their representative before God.

Although he [Jesus] was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (Heb. 5:8-9).

61

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.... Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! (2 Cor. 5:14-15, 17)

We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that,

just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life (Rom. 6:4).

...having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead (Col. 2:12).

- 62** Clearly, faith or trust in Jesus implies submission to his authority as Lord; it means basing one's life on what Jesus has done on our behalf and living as he taught us to live by his teaching and example. The decision we must make when confronted with the gospel of the Son of God is the most crucial decision a human being could ever make. Your choice regarding Jesus will have vast consequences for both time and eternity, for yourself and for everyone whose life touches your own. That is why it is so important to clearly understand the Good News about

Jesus. It is easy to reject a mere caricature of Jesus which we have mistaken for the truth about him. C. S. Lewis has cautioned us against mistaking a particular mental picture of spiritual realities for the spiritual realities themselves:

What troubles [the ordinary man] is an all-pervading difference of atmosphere between what he believes Christianity to be and that general picture of the universe which he has picked up from living in a scientific age. He gathers from the Creed that God has a 'Son' (just as if God were a god, like Odin or Jupiter): that this Son 'came down' (like a parachutist) from 'Heaven', first to earth and later to some land of the dead situated beneath the earth's surface: that, still later, He ascended into the sky and took His seat in a decorated chair placed a little to the right of His Father's throne. The whole thing seems to imply a local and material heaven—a palace in the

stratosphere—a flat earth and all the rest of those archaic misconceptions.¹⁰

64

Lewis goes on to explain that we must clearly distinguish between reality itself and the simplistic and sometimes ludicrous mental pictures that accompany our thinking about reality. We must clearly understand that what is left in Christian belief *after* we make that distinction is just as supernatural and inimical to modern secular thinking as the archaic sky-palace and the decorated chair, but there is a difference: reason rightly rejects the archaic imagery as incompatible with what is scientifically known about the universe, but there is nothing anti-scientific about the supernatural realities behind the naive mental pictures. Even if we assume that the early Christians never clearly distinguished between their own mental pictures and the gospel realities themselves (an assumption unwarranted by the historical evidence), this would in no way discredit the truth behind the imagery. Just because,

when you or I contemplate the biblical teaching about God creating man in his own image, we find it nearly impossible to resist a mental picture of an old bearded potter dressed in flowing robes forming a clay replica of himself on a deserted beach, we have not thereby discredited the doctrine. Theologians properly intend for us to understand that God, who is both limitless *and* personal, has given existence to man, who is limited but also personal. Mankind therefore can share in a personal relationship with God, since both God and man are personal entities, although one is Creator and the other is created. This is what is meant by the statement, "God created man in his own image."

Thus we see how God's creating of mankind in his own image sets the stage for the unique Christian idea that God became man without ceasing to be God. God did not become a vegetable or an irrational brute; these do not share in the divine attribute of *personhood*. The condescension and love of

God in becoming man is absolutely amazing—astounding beyond all words. But it is not *absurd* to believe that God became man for our salvation, because man was originally created in the image of God. God is an Infinite-Personal Trinity, and I am a finite-personal individual. There is no question here of man becoming infinite, or of God being reduced or transformed into the finite. The biblical view of the matter was expressed by the theologian who said that the Incarnation did not mean the conversion of the Deity into humanity, but rather the taking up of human nature into the Godhead. In the Incarnation of God in Christ, the Infinite has encompassed the finite on the basis of the attribute of personhood shared between the Creator and the human creature. Because of their creation in God's image, human beings are potentially sons and daughters of God.

THE FRUIT OF THE GOSPEL: SONSHIP IN CHRIST

God gave man the dignity of true personhood at creation, and he refuses to nullify that personhood by denying our freedom to choose. Our moral choices have real meaning because they bring forth results, either positive or negative, depending on what we choose. Our decisions bear the fruit of life or of death, and God will neither force us to do good nor abort the natural consequences of our sins. But God *has* made it possible to "un-choose" evil; he has made a way for us to return to him. We can turn back to God, back to life, love, meaning, and truth. He has personally involved himself in the plight of doomed sinners, so that we might share in the blessings of his Sonship. The apostle Paul has recorded this simple and profound statement about the real meaning of the gospel:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich (2 Cor. 8:9; compare Phil. 2:5-11).

In his Son, God has genuinely “joined the human race”; Jesus is “God with us”:

68

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife,

because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" —which means, "God with us" (Matt. 1:18-23; compare Luke 1:26-35).

69

God is not sitting aloof in his beatific glory, far removed from the pain and suffering of his human creatures. He is a loving Father who passionately cares about the problems of his children. He has left heaven to personally involve himself in our predicament. And he is calling you and me to leave our "ivory tower" of petty selfish concerns so that we can involve ourselves in the pains and problems of our fellow human beings. Being a "son (or daughter) of God" means representing the heart of God to a sinful,

hurting, dying world. It means living in union with Jesus, the Son of God—a union of love and trust in him:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal. 2:20).

70

As one who has found life in the Son of God, let me encourage you to begin your walk of faith with Jesus by being buried with him in baptism; this marks the end of sin's rule in your life as it unites you to the risen Son of God:

For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ.... having been

buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins (Col. 2:9-10, 12-13; compare Eph. 2:1-7; Rom 6:1-7).

As you continue to base your life on the truth that Jesus is the Son of God who came to bring God's saving love to the sinful human race (and to you and me personally), you will find that the Spirit of Christ is gradually changing your life. The distinctive personality traits that marked the life of God's Son will be increasingly evident in your own life:

71

...love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and

self-control. Against such things there is no law (Gal. 5:22-23).

72

God's plan is to transform us into the spiritual likeness of his Son while leaving intact our unique individuality as persons. We needn't fear that God will obliterate us as distinct individuals in order to turn us into "Christ-clones"; the universal Christ is big enough to incorporate and encompass the individuality of each of us. There is a "family likeness" in Christ that will distinguish us as his own, but our God-given individualities will remain; in fact, our personal peculiarities will be enhanced as each one of us finds our unique place in the body of Christ. Even a cursory glance at church history or at a healthy Christian assembly will reveal remarkable diversity among the saints. It's the power brokers and playboys of this world whose lives are so monotonously similar.

All of our programs for self-improvement can never make us into sons and daughters of God. So God accepts us as his adopted sons and daughters just as we are when we put our trust in his Son Jesus Christ. In baptism, we are united to the Son of God as the Spirit of Christ begins his transforming work in our lives. However, our salvation, from start to finish, is *always based on* the death and resurrection of the sinless Son of God *for us*, and never on the transforming work of the Holy Spirit *in us*.

73

And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life (1 John 5:11-13).

In Jesus of Nazareth, God has completely emptied himself to purchase our freedom from the tyranny of self-centeredness and the spellbinding terror of death. In giving his Son for us, God has given all he has to give. The gospel of Jesus Christ fills us with awe in two directions: the kindness of God, and the severity of God. On the one hand:

74

What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? (Rom. 8:31-32)

On the other hand:

...how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? (Heb. 2:3)

Let's not fool ourselves; this whole "Son of God" business must be either the cruelest hoax ever played on our wretched species, or the most blessed news of hope in the midst of utter hopelessness that ever came to human ears. At this moment, we are deciding what we will do with this Jesus, who dared to call himself the Son of God. If he was telling the truth, then one day he will be declaring what he will do with us.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

75

"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" (Matt. 16:15)?

END NOTES

1. Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands A Verdict*, Vol. 1 (San Beradino, CA: Campus Crusade For Christ, Inc., 1972), pp. 107-112 (hereafter cited as McDowell, *Evidence*).
2. C. S. Lewis, *God In The Dock*, "What Are We To Make Of Jesus Christ?", ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), p. 158 (hereafter cited as Lewis, *God In The Dock*).
3. Frederick G. Kenyon, *The Bible and Archeology* 77 (New York: Harper & Row, 1940), p. 288, cited in McDowell, *Evidence*, p. 47.
4. See also Larry Deason (with Bill Bean), *The Eternal Purpose and Plan of God—The Meaning and Purpose of Life* (Clifton Park, NY: Life Communications, 1990).
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 188-189.
6. W.T. Purkiser, Richard S. Taylor, and Willard H. Taylor, *God, Man, and Salvation—A Biblical Theology* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Press of Kansas City, 1977), p. 315.

7. To pursue the study of Christianity in comparison with other philosophical and religious systems consult Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976) and *Philosophy of Religion, Second Edition*, with Winfried Corduan (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988). See also Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* (Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968) and *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1972).

8. R.C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: The Zondervan Corporation, 1984), pp.146-147.

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9. Michael Green, *Man Alive* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968), p. 61, cited in McDowell, *Evidence*, p. 189. Those interested in further study of the resurrection may consult McDowell's *Evidence*, especially chapter 10 ("The Resurrection—Hoax or History?"); also, Norman Geisler's *The Battle For The Resurrection* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), chapter 8 ("Evidence for the Physical Resurrection"); Gary R. Habermas and Anthony G. N. Flew, *Did Jesus Rise From The Dead?: The Resurrection Debate*, ed. Terry L. Miethe (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

10. Lewis, *God In The Dock*, "Horrid Red Things," p. 68.

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