

The ‘Crucial’ Argument for Christ’s Deity

by Pastor M. V. Pereira

The gospel stands as the most irrefutable argument for the deity of Christ. So, just as the gospel is inextricably connected to the cross, so is the deity of Christ. The word ‘crucial’ comes from the Latin word for ‘cross’, which makes it easy to remember that the *crucial* argument for the deity of Christ is the argument of His *cross*. *Why was He murdered?* Because He was “making himself equal with God” (Jn 5:18). Whether or not people who read the NT perceive that Christ claimed to be God is not the real issue; the more telling question is, did His eyewitnesses? It is undeniable that the final cause of His crucifixion was because the most religious leaders of His day perceived and opposed *this* claim. Without a doubt, the leaders and authorities of Israel understood Jesus to be claiming equality with God in a most unprecedented manner; a claim that they simply could not tolerate—and *should not, unless it were true*. It was because He was “making himself equal with God” that they “were seeking all the more to kill him” (Jn 5:18). The crucial argument for the deity of Christ is the cross—the whole reason Christ was crucified was that He claimed to be God and this was seen as highhanded blasphemy. Christ lived as “a man whose words and actions implied a trespass across the inviolable boundary that separated God from mankind” (Bruce, 127).

So, why was He murdered? He was not murdered for breaking the Sabbath; He was murdered for claiming authority over the Sabbath—as *God*. They did not murder Him for claiming to be their national leader; they murdered Him for claiming to be the universal King of kings—as *God*. They did not murder Him for healing people; they murdered Him for

claiming to have authority and power over sin and its consequences—as *God*. They did not murder Him for raising people from the dead; they murdered Him for claiming to be ‘the resurrection and the life’—as *God* (cf. John 11). They did not murder Him for anything that a mere man could accomplish or claim; they murdered Him because He explicitly declared that His works were the works of God—as *God*.

While many may suggest that Jesus never claimed to be God, and may attempt to argue against the multiplicity of biblical evidences, the irrefutable reality is that this was precisely the cause of His crucifixion. The simplest evidence that demonstrates Christ as God is the impetus and unrelenting pursuit of His death. A terribly awesome irony: Christ as God—who cannot die—is killed because He is God. The Giver of life is killed and thereby man’s rejection of God serves the means of God’s acceptance of man. This is the touchstone of the Incarnation. In the words of Augustine:

“Man's maker made man that He, Ruler of the stars, might nurse at His mother's breast; that the Bread might hunger, the Fountain thirst, the Light sleep, the Way be tired on its journey; that Truth might be accused of false witnesses, the Teacher be beaten with whips, the Foundation be suspended on wood; that Strength might grow weak; that the Healer might be wounded; that Life might die.”

Christ’s mission finds meaning and validation only in the fact of His deity. Our salvation is inextricably linked to the reality of the *theanthrōpos* (‘God-man’). Both are indispensable necessities. If He were not God, then He would not be able to die for the sins of

the world. If He were not man, then He would not be able to die as a substitute for man.

That Jesus can rightly be called Savior attests to His ability to save souls (Lk 2:11). This is an ability that God alone can claim. No human being can ransom his brother, by any means of payment, “for the ransom of their life is costly and can never suffice” (Ps 49:8; cf. 49:7-9). “At the heart of orthodox belief is the recognition that Christ died a substitutionary death to provide salvation for a lost humanity. If Jesus were only a man He could not have died to save the world, but because of His deity, His death had infinite value whereby He could die for the entire world” (Enns, 225). If only God is able to save, and yet Jesus is able to save, then this ability of Jesus attests to His deity. The heavenly chorus testifies to the same: “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, **and** to the Lamb!” (Rev 7:10).

The substitutionary sacrificial death of Christ proves His deity, contrary to natural expectation, and this is immediately express in two ways:

First, it proves that Christ was perfectly innocent of any personal moral guilt of His own, lest He would not be capable nor qualified to stand in the stead of another. Christ’s death was a death for others; a substitution for sinners; a sacrifice through which guilt is covered on the ground that justice has been served upon the sacrificial victim as a substitute for the guilty. The essential requirement is that in order for the sacrifice to qualify for substitution, it must be without blemish (cf. Ex 12:5; Lev 1:3; 3:1; 22:19; Dt 17:1; 1 Pet 1:19). The external qualification of animal sacrifices served a powerful symbol to illustrate the internal qualification of the one true sacrifice for all time (cf. Heb 9:11-14). That to be without blemish in the animal sacrifice translates to moral perfection and sinlessness in the moral

sacrifice is plainly evident (cf. 1 Pet 1:19; John 1:29) and that this was met by Christ once and for all (cf. Heb 10:1-14). So for Christ’s death to be accepted by God the Father as an acceptable sacrifice to atone for the sins of others, then Christ had to be without blemish and thus sinless (cf. Jn 8:46; 2 Cor 5:21; Heb 4:15; 1 Pet 2:22; 1 Jn 3:5)—this attests to His deity since no mere man can be sinless.

Against some who would assert that Christ was merely an excellent creature, we see at once that if this ‘perfect man’ could indeed be perfect, then humanity would not be in need of a savior, only a teacher and exemplar. But this is plainly not the case. The Scripture is unmistakably clear, “None is righteous, no, not one” (Romans 3:10). Eliphaz rightly laments, “What is man, that he can be pure? Or he who is born of a woman, that he can be righteous?” (Job 15:14). God plainly reveals that “surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins” (Ecclesiastes 7:20). Humanity has and will be until the end, in the gravest need of a substitute for moral perfection and for propitiation; for true righteousness and for a means of satisfying the good and holy wrath of an ardently righteous and just God against all our offenses of rebellion and injustice. If Christ were merely human and yet sinless, then mere humans can be sinless and immediately the need for a sacrifice is eliminated and the way to God is shown to be by good works and self-accomplished righteousness. The key to heaven and eternal life with God would then be paved by the road of self-effort, self-achievement, self-goodness, self-righteousness, and self-sacrifice and not the sacrifice of a substitute. If Christ were a mere man and was accepted by God the Father as a sinless sacrifice, then surely other mere men are able to achieve sinless perfection as well. Moreover, it would stand to reason that other mere men could also be accepted by God the

Father as a sinless sacrifice, and thus other 'saviors' are possible. Who would dare to presume sinless qualification as a substitute for sinful humanity? May the words of Christ sober our thinking, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). May the heart-cry of the gospel be heard in this, that "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). It should be plain to see that the reason that salvation is in Christ and Christ alone is because He alone is sinless and He alone offers His sinless life and sacrificial death as a substitute for sinners. Christ is the only substitute for sinners. Alone is He in His ability to atone for sinners—Christ alone is able to accomplish what only God can accomplish in terms that only man can serve.

If Christ was sinless and merely human like one of us, then He would not only serve as a perfect example, His life would secure our doom. For He, according to this erroneous theory, being a mere man would have proven it possible to achieve sinlessness. Christ would not only be the perfect example of how we should live, He would—by virtue of His life—be God's argument against us. He would be the point of comparison that would secure our condemnation. He would prove that we could have done better and the hope of every human being who has failed to live sinlessly would be at once dashed into pieces. The true gospel, however, does not present Christ as the great human accomplisher of moral perfection, demonstrating to us that we can be better than we are. The true gospel presents Christ as God incarnate who came in the flesh precisely because we cannot accomplish righteousness—humanity would be hopeless if God did not step into our world to stand as a perfect substitute for us unworthy, incapable, and guilty sinners.

Second, not only does the Father's acceptance of Christ's substitutionary sacrifice prove His deity, but His deity is proved in the occasion of His crucifixion. If Christ was perfectly innocent of all moral defect, rebellion, offense, and deficiency, as indeed is emphatically true and abundantly attested to, and to the contrary was perfectly righteous in all His dealings and interactions while on this earth, then what on earth was He crucified for? The unprecedented cooperation of such a widely disparate set of enemies to ensure the temporal extermination of Jesus testifies to the threat of His uniquely holy character in the eyes of diversely sinful men.

Why did so many take their stand against Christ? Why was there such a concert of opposition, if He was morally perfect? Should we not expect that if He were a perfect man that all would find Him socially attractive, amiable, and a friend? How did both the religious and political parties come to such agreeable passion against Christ if indeed He was a perfectly righteous man? The answer is only obscured by denial of the obvious. The root cause of all His agonies could not have been sin owing to any thought or deed of His own. It could not have been any unrighteous offense against another. It certainly could not have been a moral fault, like that of a lie. What could it be, that mutual enemies such as Rome and Israel could heartily agree that this man be deserving of Rome's most mortifying and cruelest of deaths? The only possible solution to this conundrum rests in the fact that Jesus would not deny His claims and testimony of deity.

That Christ, a perfectly innocent and righteous man, was crucified is indicative of His divinity. An innocent man who did not claim to be God would not have been prosecuted, and a guilty man who claimed to be God would not

have been taken serious by either the religious elite or the public. Thus, such a man would not have been seen to be a threat to the imperial order and would likely be dismissed as a lunatic. The kingpin to this chain is that Christ, being guiltless, was sentenced to crucifixion on the grounds of His identity as the divine Messiah, King of the Jews.

Christ is God, equal in personal subsistence with the Father, and thus He could not deny the attestation of His veiled identity. Again we ask, *Why was He murdered?* Because He was “making himself equal with God” (Jn 5:18) and He would not deny it. Even His arch enemies could not bring reproach against Him (cf. John 8:46); there was no legitimate claim against His moral perfection (cf. Luke 23:41). The only hope of Annas, Caiaphas, and Herod for prosecution by Rome was ironically tied to His true identity (cf. Matt 26:65). Blasphemy was the only charge against Him. He claimed to be God (cf. John 8:58; 10:30; 12:45; etc.), others affirmed His

claim in their address of Him as God (cf. John 20:28; Phil 2:6; Titus 2:13; etc.), and still others affirmed His claim in their opposition to Him (cf. John 5:18; 10:33; 19:7; etc.). In all cases, His claim was perceived as definitive blasphemy by those who would not accept it (cf. Matt 26:65; Lk 5:21; John 10:33; etc.). There is no other ground for the persecution exacted upon Him—this attests to His deity. If it were not true, then He was deserving of death, was a sinner (at the very least He lied), and thus His death was a tragedy and not a righteous accomplishment on behalf of others. If it is true, then His crucifixion stands as a profound testimony to His deity. The gospel itself becomes the crucial argument for Christ as God. This crucial argument of His deity is, in the end, the most obvious evidence of all.

—Solo Christo

*Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness:
He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated by the Spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory.
(1 Timothy 3:16)*

Forever let us thank God that the hope of a Christian rests on such a solid foundation as a Divine Saviour. He to whom we are commanded to flee for pardon, and in whom we are bid to rest for peace, is God as well as man. To all who really think about their souls, and are not careless and worldly, the thought is full of comfort. Such people know and feel that great sinners need a great Saviour, and that no mere human redeemer would meet their wants. Then let them rejoice in Christ, and lean back confidently on Him. Christ has all power, and is able to save to the uttermost, because Christ is divine. Office, power, and pre-existence, all combine to prove that He is God. —J.C. Ryle