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THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRIST

by D. B. KNOX
Christianity is the religion of an event, an event so stupendous that it transcends the powers of our imagination: that God, the source of all, the creator and upholder of the whole universe should come into a new and intimate relationship with mankind in Jesus Christ. He was manifest in the flesh. Though He was rich, yet for us He became poor. He humbled Himself, leaving aside His glory and took the form of a servant and became man (Phil 2:5ff). God has entered into a new and permanent relationship with His creation in man. This is the Christian message.

When you reflect on it it is most extraordinary and breathtaking that the Son of God should enter into this intimate relationship with us and take our nature as man, though remaining God; subjecting Himself to our life and experiences, being tried and tested in all things as we are, in order that by overcoming temptation and suffering and
death as man and for men, He might save us from the consequences of our own sins and bring us into fellowship with Himself eternally. Through His death Jesus became victor over sin, bearing its penalty, repulsing its temptations, never wavering in faith. He was completely triumphant for us and so was raised from the dead, that in Jesus mankind might enter on the fulfilment of God's purposes of having dominion over all creation. Christians await with eagerness the culmination of God's purposes when the Lordship of Jesus will be manifested and made complete at His coming.

"God was in Christ" said St. Paul, "reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Cor. 5:19) and Jesus told His disciples that as the Father had covenanted with Him for a kingdom so He covenanted with His disciples that they should share in that kingdom (Luke 22:29).

In view of the epoch making character of Jesus'
life and death and resurrection and coming again, it is not surprising that Jesus is the centre of New Testament religion. Our Lord Himself clearly taught this; thus He invited all who are weary and heavy laden to come to Him and He would give them rest (Mt. 11:28); and He told Philip "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9). Ordinary preachers point away from themselves to God but Jesus pointed His hearers to Himself, for He was the revelation of God.

The apostles bear the same testimony to the absolute centrality of Christ in the Christian gospel and in the Christian life. St. Paul told the Corinthians that he determined to know nothing amongst them save Jesus Christ and Him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2). All the New Testament writers are full of the hope of Christ's return which will bring God's purposes for mankind to their fulfilment.
We must be on our guard against the temptation of displacing Christ from the centre of our understanding of the world's history or of our own relationship to God. There is, for example, the temptation to substitute the less personal idea of the church. Preachers are tempted to urge their hearers to come to church, to join the church and so on, rather than make the more personal call to recognise Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and submit to His will and pray directly to Him.

In the Roman Catholic denomination the cult of the Virgin Mary has had the disastrous effect of displacing God in Christ from the centre of religious devotion. Many of the attributes which the New Testament ascribes to Christ are duplicated in Roman Catholic tradition with regard to the Virgin Mary. For example, the Scriptures affirm that Jesus, who is the image of God, was sinless; that
though tempted like us in everything He did not yield at any point. Now it is important to remember that this victory was not for Himself alone but for all of us who put our faith in Him; for we are saved by this victory over sin which reached its acme at Calvary.

The Scriptures affirm that Jesus was sinless but at the same time state that the rest of mankind are sinners. "There is none righteous, no not one", said St. Paul (Rom. 3:10). However, Roman Catholic theology has come to teach that the Virgin Mary was sinless as well. It is taught that not only did she commit no sin in her life but she was free from the taint of original sin as well. However the Bible is completely silent about such sinlessness, in fact the Bible suggests the contrary, for more than once her actions are found to have been mistaken. Moreover the Bible teaches that death is the result of sin.
"Death passed upon all men for that all sinned" (Romans 5:12). Now Jesus though sinless died because of other people's sins, "He was made sin for us" said St. Paul, and "The Lord laid upon Him the iniquity of us all" Isaiah prophesied. But what of the Virgin Mary's death if she was sinless? Roman Catholics admit that the Virgin Mary died, but if she was free from all actual and all original sin, then St. Paul's statement "Death passed upon all because all sinned" would be untrue.

The theory of Mary's sinlessness presents a difficult theological problem. The rest of us are saved, because we are sinners, but on this view Mary was not a sinner, being free from original as well as actual sin; what then does Mary mean when in her song known as the Magnificat, she calls God her Saviour. On this theory it can only mean that she is saved from becoming a sinner,
as the angels are. saved from becoming sinners, saved by God's power and enabling and not saved from the consequences of being sinners by Christ's redemption, as we are. Christ died for sinners, St. Paul teaches us in Romans 5:8, but if Mary was sinless, how can she be regarded as redeemed by Christ's death or even be a member of the church, for the song of the church is given in Rev. 1:5 "Unto Him that loved us and washed us from our sins by His blood, to Him be the glory and the dominion for ever and ever".

But not only is the Bible doctrine of Christ's sinlessness duplicated by the non biblical teaching that Mary was also sinless, but Christ's resurrection is duplicated by Mary's resurrection or assumption.

In 1950 the Pope made it an article of the Roman Catholic faith that the body of the Virgin was resurrected.
after death and transferred to heaven. Before this time Roman Catholics were free to disbelieve this but now the Roman Catholic who deliberately disbelieves this teaching is regarded as being condemned to hell for disbelieving it. However, there is of course not the slightest trace in the New Testament of this doctrine of the assumption of the Virgin Mary. Moreover, it was unknown in the first four centuries of the Christian church. Proof of this, for example, is that it was unknown to St. Ambrose, or St. Epiphanius who investigated the question of the virgin's death. They are quite unaware of any idea that her body had been raised after death and taken to heaven. The idea first occurs in some of the heretical apocryphal gospels and a book teaching the assumption of the virgin had been accepted by the orthodox, mostly on the authority of what were thought to be statements of Jerome, Augustine and Dionysius, but
which are now recognised by everyone as being spurious.

Gregory of Tours, who died in 594, gives the story in the following form: "All the apostles were assembled in the house of Mary to watch at her death bed when Jesus appeared with His angels, received her soul and gave it over to the archangel Michael. When on the following day they were about to carry her body to the grave He appeared again and took it up in a cloud to paradise, there to be reunited to the soul." The story appears in a more extended form in St. John of Damascus. Not only the angels and the patriarchs stand around the death bed with the apostles but even Adam and Eve are there calling their descendant blessed for removing the curse which through them came into the world.

This doctrine of the assumption to heaven of the body of the mother of our Lord after her death parallels
Jesus' resurrection and ascension and detracts from the uniqueness of our Saviour.

Then there is the question of prayer to Mary. New Testament Christians were characterized by the fact that they prayed to Jesus. Thus St. Stephen as he was being stoned to death said "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit", and in I Cor.1:2 St. Paul described Christians as those "who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ", as did Ananias in Acts 9:14.

Never, throughout the Bible, whether in Old or New Testament, is prayer or intercession ever offered to any but to God. It is difficult to see how it could be otherwise. God is omniscient, knowing all that happens in the world, which He sustains. Thus he can hear prayers; but how can the saints, including the Virgin Mary, hear the myriads of prayers which Roman Catholics direct to them, for they are not omniscient as God.
is, nor present throughout His creation as He is, but are in heaven. Only God can read our hearts and can hear and answer prayer.

Throughout the Bible there is not the slightest hint that we should pray to the Virgin. If God had meant it otherwise would His Spirit have given us a Scripture with not even a mention of Mary throughout the Epistles, though these reflect the life of the Christian church. Yet how many myriads of miracles are attributed to her intercession these days! I am not aware of any that are attributed to Christ. This in itself is sufficient proof that these are not the result of the Spirit that inspired the Bible, for the Spirit of God will glorify Jesus, so our Lord foretold in John 16:14, "He shall glorify me".

The Rosary is a most popular form of Roman Catholic prayer. It is said in honour of Mary and consists
of 150 repetitions of a prayer to Mary for salvation together with fifteen repetitions of the Lord's prayer.

To pray to Mary depresses our concept of the goodness of our Heavenly Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. One illustration amongst numerous examples is sufficient Bernard of Clairvaux (Sermon on the Nativity IV) said "Doest thou fear the divine majesty in the Son? Wilt thou have an advocate before Him? Flee to Mary."

In the New Testament Christians looked for the coming of the Lord Jesus with a fervent and sure hope. Here again the teaching about the Virgin Mary has duplicated Jesus' prerogative, for a favourite description of her in Roman Catholic devotion is "Our hope". But it is Christ in His coming who is our hope and for whom we look.
If we examine the New Testament, apart from the birth narratives where, of course, Mary occupies a prominent and honoured place in the story, there are in fact very few references to the mother of our Lord; just a few in the gospels and one only in the first chapter of Acts, after that no more at all. Throughout the pages of the New Testament Jesus Christ is central in the thoughts and hopes of Christians and in their prayers, and we must keep the same proportion.

The cult of Mary distorts and obscures the true doctrine of Scripture. Yet in avoiding what is rightly regarded as excess, we must not overlook the wonderful privilege Mary was given, that of being the Mother of the Saviour; yet a similar privilege is given to us all, that of being closely related to the eternal God by His taking our nature to be our Saviour.
Mary sang "My spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour, for He has looked upon the low estate of his handmaiden". This is true: and it is true for all of us. God has looked upon our lowliness and has shared it; taking our nature, that through the victory of His death He might bring us into an eternal relationship of being His sons and daughters. Never let this be obscured in your mind.

He alone is our hope, to Him alone we should direct our prayers and to Him be the glory.
"THE PROTESTANT FAITH" is broadcast every second Sunday at 9.15 p.m. over 2CH.

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