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Christ, Christianity and the Bible

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Christ, Christianity and the Bible

BY

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How to Study the Bible, The Coming of Christ, The Signs of
the Times, Christian Science in the Light
of Holy Scripture, etc., etc.

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Christ

IF NOT GOD—NOT GOOD

BY I. M. HALDEMAN, D.D.

“Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is God” (Matthew 9:17).

THE world has accepted Jesus Christ as a good man.

The evidences of his goodness are manifold.

He was full of compassion.

He never looked upon the people as a crowd. He never thought of them as a mass. He saw them always as individuals. His heart went out to them. All his impulses were to pity them, sympathize with, and help them.

He went among them. He entered into all conditions, accepted all situations. He was present at a wedding, he ate with publicans and sinners and, anon, was guest at a rich man’s table.

He saw the ravages of disease, the shame of sin, the tragedies in life.

He knew there was torture in body and anguish in spirit.

He took the mystery of pain and laid it upon his heart, until tears were his meat and his drink, by day and by night. He became a man of sorrows and an expert in grief. He took upon him the woes of the world till he was bowed and bent, as with the weight of years. The tears of sympathy grooved his cheeks, as when streams carve their way down mountain sides. Because of this men looked at him and saw neither form nor comeliness; neither was there any beauty in him that they should desire him.

He was a beneficent man.

Multitudes of men are benevolent, but not beneficent.

Benevolence is well wishing. Beneficence is well doing. He was always well doing, giving sight to the blind, healing the sick, cleans-

ing the leper, feeding the hungry, raising the dead, unloosing the bonds of Satan—unwinding the serpent's coil.

He was absolutely unselfish.

He emptied himself and made room in his soul for other lives. He had no office hours and never interposed secretaries or majordomos between himself and the people. He received all who came unto him—ministering without money and without price.

There is one scene that might well be painted by a master hand.

It is evening. The western sky is all aglow with the glory of the setting sun. Far up in the dome of the infinite blue, the evening star swings golden, like a slow descending lamp let down by invisible hands. The street is in half-tone. It is packed by the strangest of throngs, by the blind, the lame, the halt, the paralyzed and the leper-derelicts of humanity—borne thither on a surging tide of life in which every wave is an accent of pain; they are driven and piled up in great, quivering heaps against a door which is partly shut, as in self-defence, by the sweltering crowd within.

Jesus of Nazareth is in that house.

He is healing the sick. He is giving health, and strength, and peace to all who seek him. He turns no one away. Compassion, sympathy, beneficence, the tenderness of a mother for her helpless babe—these are the characteristics which his daily ministry revealed.

No one ever brought a charge of evil doing or evil speaking against him.

The people who followed him said, "He hath done all things well."

Police officers sent to arrest him as a disturber of the peace found him in the midst of the people, speaking words that hushed their tumult, quieted their murmurings and gave them rest; and the officers returning to them who sent them, said, "Never man spake like this man."

Pilate's wife dreamed a troubled dream of him, and sent word to her husband not to lay hands on him—seeing that he was a just man. Thrice before heaven and earth—in a testimony that still ech-

oes through infinite spaces, and is heard by listening worlds—Pilate himself proclaimed, “I find no fault in this man.”

He lifted up his voice against sin and unrighteousness.

Against nothing did he so much speak as against religious hypocrisy. Nowhere, in any record, is language so terrible, so penetrating, so hot, so full of the flame of fire and scorching analysis, scorching and burning in its denunciation of those who on the outside (in their religious profession) were like whitened sepulchres, but on the inside (in their actual lives) were full of dead men’s bones and corruption—nowhere, outside the twenty-third chapter of Matthew, does language fall with such tremendous vibration of thunderous indignation, and the accent of aroused and fully angered justice. “Ye serpents,” “ye generation of vipers,” are some of the phrases; and the words, “fools,” “blind hypocrites,” mingle again and again with the far-sounding, judicial menace, “Woe, woe unto you.”

He seemed to be dominated and controlled by one idea—the idea of God. The God thought held and moved him. He could not go anywhere, or see anything, or utter the shortest discourse, that he did not, in some fashion, connect it with the infinite Father. Was a sower sowing seed, he saw in that incident an illustration of the fact that the true seed is the Word of God, and the true sower he who casts it into the mightier ground of the human heart. Did a flock of sheep lie at rest upon the hillside, guarded by a shepherd’s care, at once he would unfold the shepherding of a Father’s love. A tiny sparrow, flying an unnoticed speck in the distant sky, or falling ground-ward with its weary flight, was a winged witness that the Father knew and saw even the smallest details of human life. A lily in its lowliness, and yet a lily in its beauty shaming a king’s array, a lily, toiling not, but upward growing, furnished him a text from which to preach the providence of God; and a wandering beggar boy far away from home and kindred, stained with sin and dark with sorrow, gave occasion for the wondrous story of the Prodigal Son and a father’s changeless and tender love.

God! God! God! this was the supreme note of his life.

On the cross he gave utterance to words which reveal the inner character of his soul.

When a man has been lied about, falsified, his good evil spoken of and his reputation assailed (as was his before the Sanhedrin—in the mock trial given him there), when such a man has been hounded from one end of the town to the other, spit upon and jibed at and, finally, nailed through hands and feet to a torturing cross; when such a man with his heart bursting (because of the impeded circulation, driving the surging, tumultuous blood back upon it), with the sun scorching his bare temples, a crown of thorns stabbing him at every helpless turn of his restless head; when such a man, under such circumstances, can rise above the wickedness, cowardice and cheap treason that have nailed him to the cross, and pray (and pray sincerely) that his guilty murderers, villainous detractors and unscrupulous slanderers may be forgiven, that man bears witness that he has, at least, a heart of good.

And it was just such a prayer which came from the parched, dry, cracked lips of this man of Nazareth as he hung upon the cross and cried out,

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Again he spoke from the cross.

There was standing near, a woman who had been chosen of God to give him birth. She was sobbing convulsively. She was realizing what had been foretold of her more than thirty years before—“a sword shall pierce through thy own soul, also.” Mary, the mother of Jesus, stood there, brokenhearted. Jesus turned his head and looked at John, his cousin, bidding him take that weeping mother to his home, his heart and care, and be unto her henceforth a loving son.

O the man who, in the hour of his own agony, shall remember his mother, and crown her, make her the queen of his life, and ordain that others shall love and reverence her, proclaims for himself the lustre of a manhood without spot.

Once more he spoke from the place of anguish—that moment on the edge of death. There his soul, rising from the depths of the overwhelming waves of agony, cries:

“Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit.”

He who in the hour and article of death can face God and eternity, and commit himself to the hand of supreme justice as a confident child to the arms of a loving father, bears witness that in his soul there is no ghastly memory of sin, no sharp, remembered pang, no fear of offended law. Such a confidence and such a committal of triumphant calm bear witness that the heart is at rest with God, and is conscious of its own good.

For two thousand years the world, without a dissenting voice, has borne witness that he is the one man who came into the earth and walked through it superlatively good.

Among the voices in the common consent of the world that Jesus Christ was a good man, there are those who with equal insistence deny that he was Almighty God.

They agree that he had the spirit of God; that he had it in measure such as no other man before or since. They announce their belief that he is the mightiest advance on humanity ever known; that all other religious teachers pale before him as the stars before the sun. They speak of his spotless life with fervent admiration, and draw special attention to his discourses as models of exhortation to righteousness and truth. To them the sermon on the mount is a *chef d'œuvre*. Out of that sermon they take the maxim about doing unto others as you would they should do unto you. They take that maxim and frame it about and make it the "Golden Rule" of human life. They exalt Jesus as the perfect example, telling us that if we shall govern our life by him, make him our constant copy, imitate him, we shall fill our daily existence with righteousness and truth. In fact, if we seek a panegyric on the humanity of Christ; if we desire to see his goodness exalted to the heavens, and his humanity put beyond compare with the sons of men—we must needs go to the Socinian, the Arian and the Unitarian—those who deny the deity of Christ. But this exaltation of the human Christ is simply setting up a man of straw that with one blow of deific discount he may be knocked down again. He is set up as man that he may be cast down as God.

They will not accept him as God.

God Almighty (we are told) cannot be confined or shut up in any one man. Man as man and, therefore, every individual man in his

part, is the avatar of God. Each man is in some sense the incarnation of God. God is more or less enthroned in all men. God is to be found in all men as he is to be found in all nature.

A good man—call Jesus a good man—set him up as high as you please, build as lofty a pedestal for him as you will, but Almighty God—*Never!*

Over against this exaltation of Christ as a merely good man, and the persistent denial that he was God, stands the unmistakable claim which Jesus Christ himself made—that he was God.

He made that claim in many ways.

He claimed it by declaring his power and authority to forgive sin.

That was a striking moment when he proclaimed it for the first time. Four men had brought a paralytic to the house where he was preaching. When they could not get in because of the crowd, they climbed up on the roof, took off some of the tiling, and by means of ropes or corners of the mattress let the man down to the very feet of Jesus. When he saw *their* faith, he turned to the sick man and said, "Son (son of Abraham), thy sins are forgiven thee."

At once there was an uproar. The leading men, sitting round and watching him, burst out with a protest, charging him with blasphemy, saying that God only could forgive sin.

And they were right.

No mere man can forgive sin. Again and again the Scriptures teach us that forgiveness is with God that he may be feared.

In announcing the man's sins forgiven, Jesus clearly claimed the prerogative, power and authority, which belong to God.

He claimed this equality by declaring himself to be the Son of God. To the Jews, "Son of God" was equivalent to "God the Son." It meant to them, the moment he styled himself by that name, an unqualified claim to essential equality with the Father. Because of this they raged against him and would have killed him, crying out that he had made himself equal with God.

He made this claim in terms which admit of no misunderstanding. He said:

“I and my Father are one.”

When Philip said, “Shew us the Father, and it sufficeth us,” he answered and said:

“Hast thou been with me so long time and hast thou not known me, Philip? From henceforth ye know him and have seen him.”

To Philip he had also said:

“I am the way and the truth and the life—no man cometh unto the Father but by me.”

By this statement he deliberately shut out all other men as the ground and means of approach to God. He declares that God, the Father, can be found in and through him alone; that he is the supreme way, the very truth and the very life; not that he knows some truth and has a measure of life in common with men, but that he is *the* truth—the *absolute* life. Such attitude, such claimed rights, privileges and powers, belong alone to God.

But he goes beyond this.

He testifies that he has been from all eternity the manifestation of the very selfhood of the Father. Hear what he says:

“And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self, with the glory which I had with thee before the world was.”

He traces his personality backward beyond the hour when the world was launched into space, before the stellar systems were created. He goes beyond time, he takes us into eternity, and in that unbegun and measureless distance declares with all the calm assurance of accustomed truthfulness that he had the glory, the visibility, the outward manifestation and splendor of the Father’s own essential selfhood; that his relation to him was that of one who was from all eternity his determination, definition and utterance.

Such claims as these are the claims of one who declares himself to be, and without restraint, nothing less than Almighty God.

On one occasion when talking to the Jews he said that Abraham had rejoiced to see his day, had seen it and was glad. They turned upon him and reminded him that he was not yet fifty years old,

how then could he have seen Abraham, or Abraham him—that Abraham who had been dead nearly two thousand years?

He faced them and said:

“Verily, verily I say unto you, before Abraham was, I am.”

The striking thing in the statement is not the claim of pre-existence—great as that is—not that he claimed to have been in existence already—not fifty years merely, but two thousand—no! all these utterances are remarkable enough, but these are not the astounding thing he said. The astounding, the unspeakably extraordinary thing he said is found in just two words:

“I am.”

There is one place in Holy Scripture where this phrase is supremely used. In the third chapter of the book of Exodus it is recorded that God manifested himself to Moses at the burning bush, and there declared himself to be the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. He commanded Moses to return to Egypt, appear before Pharaoh and demand the release of the Children of Israel from their cruel bondage; and when Moses inquired by what name he should speak to the people, he answered:

“Say unto them, I AM hath sent me unto you.”

“I AM.”

To the Jew these two words set forth the supreme name and title of the eternal God.

In saying, therefore, “Before Abraham was—I AM,” Jesus announced himself to be the eternal, self-centred, supreme being, Almighty God. When he said this, and because they understood him, because they knew exactly what he meant by these words, the Jews took up stones to stone him.

If I were seeking to demonstrate by object lesson, and in a fashion that would admit of no reply, that Jesus claimed to be Almighty God, I would summon the mightiest and most masterful artist the world knows to come and paint for me the scene which takes place a little later as a consequence of that moment when he emphasizes his claim by saying:

“I and my Father are ONE.”

The picture would represent a great crowd of scowling, fierce, angry Jews, their hands filled with stones—some of them drawn back, the whole figure intense with readiness to cast the fatal stone—and Jesus, standing a little distance apart, looking calmly on.

Underneath the picture I would have written in great golden letters (letters so artistic, so startling, so wonderful in form, that at the risk of art itself—almost at the risk of minimizing the picture at the first glance, subordinating it to interest in the letters and dividing the mind of the onlooker between the actual scene and the letters themselves)—I would have written in letters that should smite the eye and the innermost thinking of the beholder, the words recorded in the tenth chapter of John’s Gospel, given by the Jews in reply to the demand of Jesus when, speaking with amazement, he asks, “For what good work do ye stone me?” I would have every gazer at the picture read these words till they rose up in vastness against him, smiting his attention as the very stones in the hands of the Jews—these words:

“For a good work we stone thee not but for blasphemy; and because that thou BEING A MAN MAKEST THYSELF GOD.”

The Jews were not deceived.

They knew what he had done.

They knew that he claimed to be no less than very God himself.

There can be no doubt that he claimed to be God.

There need be, really, no discussion about it.

The New Testament records the claim.

I am not making any issue as to whether the New Testament is true, or reliable. I am saying thus far, only, that the New Testament (the Gospels of the New Testament), in language concerning which there can be no possible mistake or even ground for misinterpretation, records the fact that Jesus Christ did claim to be Almighty God.

If Jesus Christ were not Almighty God (as he claimed to be) he was not a good man (as it is said he was).

The proposition ought to be self-evident.

No mere man can claim to be God and be good.

He who, as mere man, claims to be God, robs God of the glory that is exclusively his.

He who thus claims to be God, and bids men go into eternity trusting him as God, is a deceiver.

No man who robs God of equality, and who deceives men into believing that he is God, can be good—he is a wicked and blasphemous deceiver.

There is only one way in which the character of Jesus Christ can be saved on this claim of his to be God—if that claim were not true.

It can be saved only by assuming that he was self-deceived; that he sincerely believed himself to be God, but was blinded and held fast by his own mistaken concept.

But the man who claims to be Almighty God, and claims it as he did, can be self-deceived only when he is a mental weakling, unbalanced in mind, or absolutely insane.

None of these things can be predicated of Jesus Christ.

On the contrary, he was the most intellectual man the world has ever known.

Mark how he met the wisdom and the genius of the men who surrounded him. Again and again they came to him with crafty and perplexing questions. With a word he solved their problems, flashed truth into their shame-smitten faces, and silenced them. In all the universe there is no soul meaner, more contemptible, more cowardly, and utterly lost to every sense of decent manhood than the man who, for the sake of entangling a good man in his speech, asks him questions in public, before an audience ready at every turn to misquote and misinterpret his slightest utterance; and that is what they did. They came to him, not with the desire to know the truth, but to confound him, cast him down and destroy his prestige with the people. To every question he gave an answer having in it spiritual truth, but bearing the unmistakable stamp of rare wisdom and intellectual superiority.

His words, the simple speech he used in the midst of them, or alone with his disciples, have been the impulse of the mightiest intellectual activity the world has ever known. Out of his words have grown systems of theology that may well call for all there is of brain power and capacity in those who study them. Here are to be found the keenest speculations and the farthest outreach of metaphysical suggestion and the most detailed analysis of which the human mind is capable. Book after book, treatise after treatise, discourse after discourse, have been produced out of the simplest and most detached things he said. No man can read his speeches and not find the mind stimulated, shocked, quickened and impelled forward even upon the most daring lines of thought.

It would be easy to call the roll of the princes and kings in the realm of intellect, men whose thoughts burn and flame like great quenchless lights; men whose minds are the storehouses of knowledge, and whose utterances by word and pen have moved the quickest and most forceful lives in the world. It would be easy to call the long roll of these names shining like stars and constellations in the firmament of thought—princes and kings of intellect who acknowledge that Jesus Christ is not only superior to them morally and spiritually, but intellectually.

What man is there to-day with any degree of mental self-respect who would dare to stand up and assert himself the equal of Jesus Christ intellectually?

Without necessity of demonstration, it ought to be a truth beyond question that Jesus Christ was the most intellectual man the world has ever known.

Such a man as that could not be self-deceived.

If he were not Almighty God he knew it.

He knew it as well as these good Unitarians, and these wondrously advanced scholars who cannot get beyond the glamour of his humanity.

He knew it at first hands.

If he were not Almighty God—if he were only a man—he knew it, knew it through and through, in every fibre of his being.

There is no possibility then whatever for him to have been deceived.

If he were not deceived, if he knew he was not God, then—

HE WAS NOT A GOOD MAN.

This is his own argument:

A young man came to him and said, "Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may inherit eternal life? and he said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good *but one, that is God.*"

The argument is simple enough.

"You call me good. God alone is good. If I am not God, I am not good."

Not good!

Nay! If he were not God, he was the most wantonly wicked man of whom I ever heard.

If he were not God, not only does disaster fall upon himself in the total destruction of his character, and in the consequent and final driving of him from the suffrage and consideration of men, but the disaster falls upon all who have put their faith in him.

If Jesus Christ were not God, then he never forgave the sins of a single soul, and all those throughout the two thousand years who have gone into eternity trusting in his name have gone into that eternity unforgiven and unshrived of God.

If Jesus Christ were not God, then he has not forgiven the sin of a single human being alive to-day.

You had sinned! There were memories of the sins you had committed. They allowed you no rest. They gave you anguish of mind. Others could not forgive you. You could not forgive yourself. The consciousness that you stood naked before the all-seeing eye of a holy God; that he knew the circumstances and every detail thereof, down to the very intents and purposes lying behind your deeds, and even your thoughts; that he looked into and saw all that was in your heart; in the consciousness growing clearer and stronger and more terrible each day that you had no excuse, no place that you could hold for a moment; that if he summoned you to his presence,

you would stand in the white light of his unmixed holiness, and the inexorable and unrelenting wrath of his essential antagonism and just hatred against sin; all this consciousness taking voice in you and through you, cried out in your soul, "I am guilty and undone." And this filled you with a horror of great darkness and the utter blackness of a hopeless despair. Then you heard the voice of Jesus Christ saying, "Come unto me." "Him that cometh unto me I will in no wise cast out." You came. You fell at his feet. You owned his death as your atoning sacrifice. You claimed him as your substitute. You claimed forgiveness through his blood. He said to you, as he said to the paralytic, "Thy sins are forgiven thee." You rose and went away as when one is released from a galling chain; as when a burden that was crushing to earth has been lifted from the sore, bleeding shoulder; as when one who has been tossed on a midnight sea enters the haven while the dawn is breaking, casts anchor and touches shore. For years you have had peace. The memory of your sins are there (for though God when he forgives forgets them, you cannot). Like David, perhaps, you cry, "My sin is ever before me!" The sin marks are there as the nail holes in the wall, but you have been able to look at them and have peace because you have said to yourself, "I am not an unwhipped of justice, my sins have been punished in my substitute; they have been fully answered for in his blood. He has forgiven me and justified me and made me clean. In him I stand clothed in the very 'righteousness of God.' I hate my sin and despise it for what it is in itself, for what it made him, my redeemer, to endure, but I have peace because he has fully satisfied in my behalf. I have actually satisfied in him and am delivered before God's court of holiness both from the guilt and the demerit of sin. I have, in short, *gone through the judgment with Christ on the cross*. He has pronounced forgiveness—absolution—upon me, and he has done so by virtue of his power and authority as the living one in whom dwelleth all the fulness of the godhead bodily—as my saviour and my God he has forgiven me and I am at peace."

All this you have said within yourself and testified.

But I ask you now to face the terrible fact—if Jesus Christ were not God—this terrible fact—that you have been deceived.

You have had a false peace.

You have been living in a fool's paradise.

You are before God an unpardoned and as yet unpunished criminal awaiting your doom. All this is absolutely your state –

IF –

If Jesus Christ were not Almighty God.

If Jesus Christ were not Almighty God, he had no authority nor power to forgive your sins. NO! And if Jesus Christ were not God I know not where to bid you turn. You must carry the load of your sins all your days; and when you die, go into eternity and face a holy God who tells you by every law and fact of nature that he never forgives in a single case till he has first punished the sin and with it the sinner.

If Jesus Christ were not God, his death was not an atonement.

And this surely should be plain enough.

Only God can atone to God.

Only an infinite being can satisfy an infinite being.

If Jesus Christ were not God he could not make an atonement.

If he did not make an atonement, then the world has never been reconciled to God nor brought up on mercy ground. Instead of being lifted up to the plane of grace and mercy, the world is still under the condemnation and judgment of God, no longer under a suspended sentence, but sheer and defenceless, with nothing to hinder the crash of doom at any moment.

There is no hope. There is no daysman. There is no one to offer unto God what he demands, and unto man what he needs. There is no mediator between a holy God and a sinful man.

If Jesus Christ were not God, then he did not rise from the dead. He did not bring life and immortality to light, and, as for me, the preacher, I have no light to hold out to you in the all-embracing gloom and night of death.

There is no hope.

If a man shall tell me there is no hereafter, that death ends all, I shall take up the law of induction and argue him to a standstill