

A Biblical And Exegetical Response to What Must One Believe ...

by David Edwards

A recent paper in *Seedbed* addressed the issue of minimal belief required for salvation. The author reached the conclusion that it was not necessary to believe in the divinity of Christ in order to be saved.¹ This paper argues that such a conclusion is based on a serious misinterpretation of Scripture.

The author begins by asking, *What must one minimally believe about the role (name) of Jesus in order to put faith in him adequate to enter the kingdom and be saved from condemnation?*² He attempts to answer this question by examining a number of NT passages that either state what people should believe, or what they actually did believe, in order to be saved. He observes that these passages utilise a variety of titles for Jesus, but not once do they state that one must understand the divinity of Jesus in order to be saved. From this he concludes, *What is required is simply to put one's faith personally in Jesus as the Messiah, meaning Lord and Savior.*³ He suggests that this constitutes the facts one must believe about Jesus in order to be saved, whilst the divinity of Christ and his penal substitutory sacrifice are facts which are *Biblical but not basic to the Gospel; They are true and beneficial to know but belief in them is not a prerequisite to saving faith.*⁴

What is right about R.B.'s case?

His affirmation that our approach to the Muslim must be based, not on a particular evangelistic tradition, but on the Word of God; that we are saved, not by right doctrine, but by saving faith in Jesus as Lord; that frequently in the NT faith precedes understanding; that without the work of the Holy Spirit natural man cannot understand the divinity of Christ.

What is wrong with R.B.'s case?

Firstly, he assumes that a person must be actually regenerated in order to understand Jesus' divinity. This is actually taking things a step further than the NT texts that he uses to support this view.⁵ These texts merely indicate the need for The Spirit to illuminate a person's mind in order for them to understand spiritual truth.

Secondly, he assumes a western view of conversion as happening at a particular point in time. There are some instances of this happening in the NT, however the twelve disciples appear to have had a journey to faith that lasted 3 years. During this period they seem on occasions to have tentatively thought Jesus might be God,⁶ while at other times they clearly doubted.⁷ Those of us who have disciplesd MBBs frequently see a similar pattern. We are not suggesting that there is not a specific time when someone enters the kingdom. However on

many occasions we cannot see that point at the time, though God may do so. Often it is only when we later look back that we can see the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. It is significant that the NT never tells us to lead people to Christ. It simply tells us to disciple them. Thus the question, *what do they need to know to be saved*, is neither for us to answer nor is it missiologically relevant. What is clear from the NT is that we have to disciple people and this includes *teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you*.⁸ As we shall subsequently show, even in the Gospel passages that R.B. cites Jesus identifies Himself as God. Thus teaching the divinity of Christ is basic to the faith. The only relevant missiological question to emerge from this is not *should* we present the divinity of Christ to Muslims but *how* can we meaningfully do so.

Thirdly, he observes that none of the NT passages describing what is necessary for salvation mentions Jesus' divinity. There is an implicit assumption here that the NT can be used as a systematic theology that describes everything that the early Church believed about a particular issue. We need to remember that Paul wrote his epistles to correct *misunderstandings* about doctrine and practice that he had previously taught. They therefore presuppose that his hearers already know the basics of the Christian faith. This is the main reason that we only rarely find explicit statements regarding Jesus' divinity in the NT.

Fourthly, he bases his whole case on the assumption that all of the titles of

Jesus that he examines represent only messianic roles and do not ascribe divinity to Jesus. This is the point where we must most profoundly disagree with R.B. During the time of Jesus—which scholars normally refer to as The Second Temple era—Jews understood the distinction between God and everything else primarily on the basis of two aspects of YHWH's identity.⁹ Firstly, YHWH was the sole creator of all things. All else was created, He alone was the giver of life. Secondly, He was the sole ruler of all things. Because this was who YHWH was, Jews responded by worshipping Him alone. What is most significant about the way the NT describes Jesus, is that it includes Him in this unique identity of God. Paul, for example, appears to have rewritten the Jewish *Shema* (*Hear O Israel The LORD our God is One....*) to say that God is One and He, the Creator, is Jesus (1 Cor. 8:6). Paul elsewhere states that He is the visible manifestation of the invisible God (1 Tim. 6:13-16). This participation of Christ in YHWH's unique divine rule can be seen in references to Jesus' sovereignty over *all things*—a phrase which formed a standard part of Jewish monotheistic rhetoric; use of the name Christ in ways similar to those used for YHWH in the OT, e.g. calling on the name of Jesus, and various acts such as baptism done *in the name of Jesus*; prayer offered to Christ as well as to God "The Father";¹⁰ and Jesus' identification of Himself as the one who alone will exercise judgment at the end of the age. In such ways Jesus was directly identified with

YHWH. As such the title *Lord* (Greek *kyrios*) should almost certainly be interpreted as referring to YHWH, the Hebrew name of God which the Septuagint (Greek translation of OT) translates as *kyrios*.

We shall now see that quite a number of the texts which R.B. has listed as describing what is necessary in order to be saved, actually do refer to the divinity of Christ:

Jn. 9:35-7. *Jesus asked the blind man who had been healed, do you believe in the Son of Man? ... He said Lord I believe and he worshiped Him.* Note that this monotheistic Jew worshiped Jesus.

Jn. 11:25-27. *Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me though he die, yet shall he live ... i.e. Jesus is the giver of life.*

Acts 2:36-38. *Let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified ... repent and be baptised every one of you for the forgiveness of your sins and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.* Note: 1) Jesus is *Lord*. Interestingly Peter distinguishes between the titles *Lord* and *Christ* (i.e. Messiah); 2) baptism *in the name of Jesus*; 3) repentance and baptism in Jesus' name results in forgiveness of sins, i.e. Jesus participates in God's sovereign rule as Judge;¹¹ 4) this also results in the gift of the Spirit, something that only God can give.

Acts 3:14. *The Holy and righteous One ... the author of life ... His Christ ... the Christ appointed for you, Jesus.* 1) The Holy and righteous One, two specific OT names for YHWH.¹² 2)

The author of life, i.e. Jesus is identified as the Creator.

Acts 11:17. *You know the word which He sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace by Jesus Christ (He is Lord of all)... and he commanded us to preach to people and to testify that He is the one ordained by God to be the judge of the living and the dead... 1) He is Lord of all, i.e. Jesus is identified as the ruler of all things 2) the judge of the living and the dead, i.e. Jesus exercises judgement over all things.*

Acts 19:4-5. ... and Paul said "John baptised with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is Jesus." On hearing this they were baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus. i.e. baptism in Jesus' name.

Romans 10:9. *If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you will be saved.* Confession that Jesus is Lord, i.e. YHWH.

It is therefore clear that **R.B.'s claim that these titles refer to Christ's roles but not to his divine nature cannot be sustained.** I would suggest that it is this distinction between Jesus' function and his nature that lies at the heart of his misreading of the NT evidence. The simple fact is that the Hebrew worldview saw God in relational terms, i.e. it identified Him as the Creator, Sole Ruler, Judge of both themselves and the rest of creation; it did not have an abstract concept of "divine nature." Thus the idea of there being a distinction between God's nature and His roles was something so foreign to the Hebrew

worldview that it is very unlikely to have been at all understood by most Palestinian Jews.¹³ However the Greek worldview, which was influenced by the Platonic split between spirit and matter, did have an abstract concept of divine nature. The early Church Fathers, who operated within the Greek worldview, were therefore able to talk in abstract terms about divine nature and Jesus being of one substance (*homooousios*) with the Father but the trinity consisting of different persons (*hypostasis*). The historic Christian creeds which we have inherited, therefore, reflect these Greek philosophical categories. **In presenting the Gospel to Muslims, those of us who are westerners need to recognise that many of the categories that we instinctively think in are actually Greek contextualisations of the Biblical message.**

We therefore need to be very careful that we do not try to impose such

Greek philosophical categories onto our interpretation of what Scripture says the earliest Church regarded as basic beliefs about Jesus. Rather we need to look at the christology of the earliest—Jewish—Christians and interpret it in the light of a Hebrew worldview, as we have briefly sought to do in this paper.¹⁴ **In seeking to help our Muslim and MBB friends understand Jesus' divinity, we need to remember that most of them come from worldviews similar to that of first century Jews.** It is therefore little wonder that rational explanations of Jesus' divine nature have borne little fruit in the Muslim world. Such

abstract concepts simply may not exist within the worldview of our friends. Equally, if we seek to lead our Muslim friends to a position of merely accepting Jesus as Saviour and Lord when we misunderstand those terms to mean something less than divinity—then we are in danger of imposing on them a distortion of Scripture derived from our own worldview and actually making it harder for them to understand Jesus' divinity.

Seen from this perspective it is clear that Jesus' divinity was not, as R.B. suggests, something which was *Biblical but not basic to the Gospel*. Indeed it is **sobering to note that when Christians who have held less than orthodox christologies have sought to respond to Islam, their christologies have often led them to ascribe some degree of prophethood to Muhammad and to see Islam as in some way preparatory for the Gospel.**¹⁵

If we are to accurately interpret the Scriptures then we must first de-contextualise our own understanding of the Gospel. For most of us this is based on a western worldview, not unrelated to that of the Greek fathers who formulated the creeds. Only when we have done this can we, as R.B. rightly seeks to do, develop missiological practice on the basis of it.

It seems to me that **the most important missiological issue to arise from a study of the early Church's christology is not *whether* we should regard Jesus' divinity as basic to saving faith, but *how* we should present it in the context of the Muslim world.** As the

first proclamation of this was in the context of a Jewish monotheistic worldview that bears distinct, though not exact, parallels to the Muslim worldview, then it is likely that a careful study of how this occurred is likely to be the most fruitful avenue of approach.

Footnotes

1. R.B. "What must one believe about Jesus in order to be saved by faith in Him?" *Seedbed XIV*, 2: 4 -11.

2. *Ibid.*, 4.

3. *Ibid.*, 4.

4. *Ibid.*, 11.

5. Jn. 16:12-14; 1 Cor 2:13-16.

6. Worship is probably the clearest indication of this, e.g. after Jesus walked on the water the disciples worshiped him saying, *You are truly the Son of God*. (Matt. 14:33). It may be significant that Jesus' words on the water were, *Take courage I AM* (Gk. *ego eimi*). As Jesus was almost certainly speaking in Aramaic, a language cognate with Hebrew, it would have been very easy for the disciples to interpret this as an allusion to the OT name YHWH (Ex 3:14). Similarly, in Jn 20:28-29 Thomas identifies Jesus as his Lord and God, a statement that Jesus explicitly affirms in the presence of the other disciples. Immediately prior to his ascension (Matt. 28:16-20) the disciples worshiped him—although some had doubts. Jesus responded to this by stating that all authority in Heaven and on Earth had been given to him. We shall later show that by doing so he directly identified himself with YHWH, the sole ruler of the universe.

7. e.g. the two disciples on the Emmaus road, Lk. 24:19-21ff, cf. also

Matt. 28:16-20 above.

8. Matt. 28:20

9. Here our argument is substantially

based on that of R. Bauckham in his recent publication, *God Crucified*, (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998) passim.

10. So L. Hurtado, *One God One Lord*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2nd edition, 1998): 104-108.

11. Lk. 5:20ff clearly indicates that within the worldview of Second Temple Judaism only God could forgive sins.

12. *The Holy One* is one of the most common names for YHWH in Isaiah, (e.g. Isa. 1:4; 17:17, etc.), the title *The Righteous One* is less common but also occurs in Isaiah (24:16).

13. There was until recently a considerable discussion amongst NT scholars as to whether certain heavenly figures in the inter-testamental literature were depicted as being functionally, but not ontologically, divine. However, Bauckham has demonstrated that such was not possible within the Hebrew worldview, a conclusion earlier reached on anthropological grounds by P.G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections On Missiological Issues*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994): 124-125.

14. I am not suggesting that christological terms such as *nature* are unbiblical. Far from it, Paul uses them in addressing the primarily Greek Church at Philippi. I am simply drawing attention to the fact that the earliest Christian communities consisted of Palestinian Jews who came to accept Jesus as God without using such concepts, but simply by identifying him directly with YHWH the sole ruler and creator of the universe.

15. e.g. in the nineteenth century, F.D. Maurice, Bosworth Smith and Canon Isaac Taylor. Cf. C. Bennett, *Victorian images of Islam*, (London: Grey Seal, 1992):54-55, 59 (Maurice); :5-7, 247-249 (Smith); 181-191 (Taylor), who provides a concise and sympathetic summary of their approach to Islam.