

The Heart of the Gospel: the Person and Work of Christ

by B.R.

I'd like to respond to the article *What one must believe about Jesus...* (Seedbed 2/99). If I have understood the author properly, it seems that some of his main concerns involve Christians making the gospel too intellectually and theologically complex. He says that a person is not "saved by doctrine per se" and that "...the Gospel is very simple and does not require one to have a great depth of theological understanding."

Whereas I would agree with these statements by themselves, I believe that the method of the study as well as its conclusions are seriously flawed theologically and practically, with the outcome being that our witness to

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Muslims will be seriously hindered were we to take the study as a whole to heart. We do no favor to our Muslim friends by not presenting to them the deity of Christ and his atoning sacrifice, nor can we avoid directly dealing with these issues. And these issues go to the very heart of Christianity and the gospel message itself: the person and the work of Christ.

The impression that the article gives is that one need not believe in the deity of Christ (his person) or his atoning sacrifice (his work) in order to be

saved. Perhaps the argument is more subtle: one must believe these things but not necessarily understand them or understand a lot about them. However, it doesn't seem to me that the author is arguing for this more subtle point. I also assume that the author would agree that a professing Christian (like a Jehovah's Witness—they themselves claim to be Christians.) who explicitly denies the deity of Christ and his atoning sacrifice would not be considered saved, even though the person claims to have personal faith in Jesus as Lord and Christ.

It is precisely here that the trouble with the article begins. It seems to assume that one can take words like "Lord," "Savior," "Christ," "Son of God," "King," and even "faith" and "salvation" in isolation from other Biblical teaching, as if these words had self-evident meanings. But as interactions with modern liberalism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims and others have shown, these words must be defined and explained, and the varying definitions can involve a wide range of very deadly heresies. Unless one defines these words Biblically, and that involves using the whole context of the Bible, not just the "evangelistic" passages, we are left with empty words, with a faith that has no object.

The word for "Lord" (*kurios*) in the New Testament teaches Christ's divinity. When *kurios* is used to refer to

Jesus, at times it is the translation for God's name, *Yahweh* (See, for example, Acts 2:21, as it translates Joel 2:32, and invites unbelievers to call on the name of the Lord (*Yahweh*) to be saved. The apostles then invite the people to call on the name of Jesus, because "there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). See also Hebrews 1:10.); at times it is a Messianic title; and at times it has a meaning more familiar to Gentiles, like ruler and master, one with dominion, although the Jews knew this meaning as well: "Lord of heaven and earth." Whether from a Jewish or Gentile background, people understood what "Jesus is *kurios*" meant. He is *Yahweh* himself. (The Septuagint used *kurios* to translate the extremely frequent YHWH of the Old Testament, and the New Testament writers and preachers continued that practice. All Hebrew-speaking Jews used the Hebrew word for Lord, *adonai*, in pronouncing YHWH. A Jew had no problem understanding what "Jesus is *kurios*" or "Jesus is *adonai*" meant.) The Old Testament teaching of the Messiah (Christ) taught that the Messiah would be divine (See, for example, Dan. 7:13 "The Son of Man," Is. 9:6, and Ezek. 34:11 "I, I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out."). Who can be ruler, master, king, the one who has dominion over all and yet not be God? Even my Muslim friends and those I've met just for the first time understand what "Lord" (*rabb*) means, and they often ask me, "Why do you Christians call Jesus *rabb*? There's only one *rabb*, and

he is Allah." Others ask, after coming to an Oasis meeting, "Why do you Christians sing *hamdan* — praise — to Jesus? Only God is to be praised."

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People in the New Testament clearly understood that the phrase "Son of God" meant that Jesus was divine. John 5:18 says: "This was why the Jews sought all the more to kill him, because he not only broke the Sabbath but also called God his own Father, making himself equal with God." It is to these unbelieving Jews that Jesus goes on in verses 19-29 and says things like "whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise," "as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will," "The Father has given all judgment to the Son," "That all may honor the Son, even as they honor the Father," and "For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself."

The problem that the Pharisees and other Jews had with Jesus' clear, up-front teaching was not the theological complexity of grasping intellectual concepts. Rather, they did not like what Jesus said. They were opposed to him, to his person. Sinners are in rebellion against God himself, and so when he comes to them they don't like it. It is no different with Muslims. However, the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit changes a person's

heart, such that he comes to accept and embrace that which he formally rejected and hated-God himself.

(An important underlying disagreement that I have with the author concerns the relation of faith and regeneration. He states that "Those who put their faith in him receive the forgiveness of sins, the regeneration and guidance of the Holy Spirit, and assurance of eternal life in the Kingdom of God." The logical order here is that faith precedes regeneration. The sinner exercises faith in Jesus in order to receive regeneration. The sinner, according to the author, is able to have faith but not able to understand the deity of Christ prior to regeneration. However, I believe that Scripture teaches the reverse logical order: regeneration precedes faith. It is only the regeneration of a person's heart—a sovereign work of God—that enables the sinner to put his faith in Jesus. Apart from regeneration, the sinner is not able to exercise faith in Jesus, because he is dead in his trespasses and sins: "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, indeed it cannot; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom. 8:7-8). But the very regeneration that enables faith enables a full-orbed faith, one that trusts in and embraces the person and work of Christ. This is a classic Arminian/Calvinist disagreement, and one that we can see through this discussion has far-reaching and practical consequences concerning what we believe about evangelism.)

Now back to the titles given to Jesus. Even the word "Savior" has to have other words and sentences to give it a Biblical meaning, so that it says something about Jesus as the object of our faith. This doesn't have to be done in deep, dark intellectual ways. "Saved from what?" Sin. "How did Jesus do that?" He died in our place and took the punishment that we deserved. A brief look at some Old Testament stories can clearly communicate the substitutionary nature of the sacrifices. Far from being so deeply theological, the Lord used vivid pictures in the Old Testament to teach very basic concepts to his people-of all ages and intellectual abilities.

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My Muslim friends have very little problem understanding the atoning sacrifice of Christ. They just don't like it. They don't agree with it. They think that no one can pay the price for their sins, that they can be responsible for themselves. Until they cease to trust in themselves to save themselves and cast themselves upon Christ as their only hope of forgiveness, they cannot be saved. It is hard to imagine a saved person who says, "I know Christ saved me, but I don't know from what or how he did it." Very simple and even brief explanations can clear up any confusion.

Thus, the article in question seems to use words in isolation from a context which gives them meaning. The study

also assumes, in its method, that "evangelistic" passages can be seen in isolation from "teaching" and other passages. But this is not the case.

First, certain "evangelistic" passages were not included in the article, passages such as John chapters 5—10, where Jesus speaks truth to unbelievers. In fact, here we have very long speeches by Jesus as he explains gospel truths to unbelievers. This was part of Jesus' witness. The teaching includes his deity. It so happens that in these passages Jesus is for the most part rejected. But this did not change his witnessing strategy.

Second, in many of the "evangelistic" passages there is a whole assumed theological background. Witnessing to the Jews in the New Testament was not done in a vacuum. Much Holy Spirit enscripturated preparation had been done.

As I have shown above, it is simply not true what the author says when he states: "All of the Messianic titles refer to Christ's roles; none refer to his divine nature." It is also strange that the author defines the "name" of Jesus as simply his "role." "Name" in the Bible includes role but speaks also of the person. The "name" of God tells us not just what he does, but who he is, his characteristics, his attributes. The "name" of Jesus cannot be made to exclude his person. Both the person and work of Christ are at the heart of the Gospel message. Even the name Jesus means "Yahweh saves." Just as Ezekiel promised, Yahweh himself, in the person of Jesus, has come to save

his sheep. Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us.

It bothers me that many of the author's arguments concerning Messianic titles not referring to the deity of Christ are the very ones frequently cited by Jehovah's Witnesses. Standard evangelical works countering the Jehovah's Witnesses can be consulted for a refutation of the author's claims about Messianic titles.

It is also the case that much more is said in these evangelistic encounters than what we have recorded for us. Acts 2:40 says that Peter "testified with many other words and exhorted them." What would some of these other words be? They would be related to the Old Testament Scriptures. They would involve teaching, explanation, persuasion, clarification, exhortation, proof-giving, etc. In witnessing we are not, nor were the apostles, reduced to short title-phrases and bare usage of the words "faith" and "salvation." Rather, we must explain what these things mean and how they apply to people. We must make sure that people understand what we are asking them to do and to believe. Where do we find the explanations for these things? In the Scriptures, and in our case, that is the full teaching both of the Old and New Testaments.

Paul, when he writes Romans, says, "So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome" (1:15). He goes on and preaches that gospel in chapters 1-8. He writes in such a way that it is clear that he intends to reach even unbelievers with his message and that

believers were supposed to use his teaching in their gospel presentations and discussions with unbelievers. "Therefore you have no excuse, O man, whoever you are"(2:1). He cites question after question that an unbeliever might pose, and he gives the answers.

In the weeks prior to my own conversion I began to read Romans, and God burned certain verses into my soul. Certainly there was much I didn't understand, and I understand new things each time I read Romans, but much was clear and helpful to me as an unbeliever.

All this is to say that the "teaching" passages of the Bible were not intended for some private "in-house" use and to be isolated from evangelism. They were to help and inform our evangelism. And thus verses concerning the deity of Christ and his atoning sacrifice in these "teaching" passages are meant to be used in our evangelism and cannot be isolated from it.

Even from a practical point of view, there is no way to avoid it. Most Muslims do not become Christians via a one-time, brief, two-minute exhortation to "have faith in Jesus as Christ, their Lord." They usually need time to read and study the Bible and think about issues and consider their lives and ask questions and discuss. This will most often be done with at least one other Christian and often with a group of Christians or other seekers. There will be exposure to the "teaching" sections of the Bible. Muslims want honest answers from Christians and

want to know what they are getting into. It is artificial and impossible to isolate the "evangelistic" passages from the "teaching" passages.

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This brings up another issue as well. Most Muslims do not exist in isolation from Christians or Christianity. (Let me explain myself, since this seems like a surprising statement from a missionary to unreached and hidden peoples.) Many Muslims today have had some contact with Christianity, even if it is just in its nominal form. Many are aware of people from a Roman Catholic or Orthodox or Coptic profession of faith. Many have seen things concerning Christianity on TV and in movies. Others have encountered Christianity through colonialism. Most of these encounters do nothing to further the gospel and are often a witness against the gospel. Yet, the Muslims themselves think that they know something about Christianity.

Even those who have had no contact like that mentioned above interact with Christianity at times. Their Islamic teachers teach against Christianity and point out its errors. Mohammed himself interacted with Christianity and included these "interactions" in the Koran. Thus, by virtue of just reading the Koran, a Muslim thinks he knows something about Christianity.

Thus, when we encounter Muslims they often have questions about Christianity and Christians and their beliefs

and their errors. Even if I wanted to avoid questions about the deity of Christ and his atoning sacrifice, I couldn't. (But why would I want to? Why would I not want to talk about the person and work of Christ to a Muslim? Why would I not want to tell him who Christ is and what he has done? That is the one thing I've come there to tell him about.) Muslims, both in France and Morocco where I've been, frequently ask me questions on these topics. I often don't even bring them up; they do. And they do because **the Koran cuts right to the heart of the matter and denies the very core of Christianity: the person and the work of Christ.**

And the Muslims who ask me these questions appreciate honest answers. They usually don't agree with them right away or even ever, but they begin to understand what the Bible teaches. They then must personally grapple with it and deal with their own deep antipathy towards the one true God (who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and their pride in their religious works. For those in whom the Lord is working, the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit opens their eyes, raises them from the deadness of their trespasses and sins, and they then embrace that which they formerly opposed. They then trust in the name of Jesus, both who he is and what he has done. This is genuine conversion.

If the problem of Muslims, or any unbeliever, was simply intellectual understanding of complicated truths, then an approach like that mentioned

in this article (seeking a bare minimum faith content, avoiding difficult questions or "exhausting" situations) would be welcome. But that is not their problem. The problem is rebellion against God, his person and his ways. It is not surprising that that rebellion would be most evident at the most crucial point of the gospel: the person and work of Christ. We must faithfully proclaim, share, and live out the gospel, without avoiding the tough issues. We need to listen to Muslims, interact with them, persuade, reason with, exhort, explain things, answer questions, have Bible studies—all of this over a period of time, dealing with many issues. We can trust that God the Holy Spirit will open eyes and regenerate hearts so that some will embrace the good news of who Jesus is and what he has done for them.

I want to say in closing that **I imagine that the author of the article would agree with me on many points**, including most of the last paragraph. Yet, unless I've misunderstood his argument, and that can easily happen in written discussion, I think that **we have some serious disagreements that speak to the very heart of Christianity and evangelism**, the content of the gospel. I believe that flawed methods and premises (the isolation of words from their contexts, the isolation of "evangelistic" passages from "teaching" passages, and treating Muslims as if they were isolated from Christianity) and just incorrect interpretation (for example, the claim that no Messianic titles "refer to [Christ's] divine nature") lead to conclusions that are very

harmful to the missionary task among Muslims.

I believe that Scripture teaches that a belief in Jesus' divinity and in his atoning sacrifice is essential to genuine saving faith. Certainly no one who denies these truths—such as Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, liberal Protestants—can be saved unless they repent from these fundamental rebellions against the person and work of Christ. It is also difficult to imagine anyone being saved who didn't know

what he was saved from, who it is that saved him, and how he did it. Whereas we will all be growing in our depth of understanding of and appreciation for these great truths of redemption, they can all be stated clearly and simply and even understood by a child. Scripture has done just that—and that helps us in our evangelism. In that sense, I am in hearty agreement with the author, who said: "...the Gospel is very simple and does not require one to have a great depth of theological understanding."