

Death, Immortality, and Heaven: No 2

In the study of either of the topics in the heading above, it is essential that we begin with the nature of deity. Without bogging down in details, I will assume that you agree that God is omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent – all knowing and universally aware, present everywhere instead of being limited in a localized body, and able to accomplish anything consistent with truth/reality. I dislike using snippets of scripture as prooftexts, but for brevity and clarity I shall use them here inviting you to read the full contexts.

GOD IS SPIRIT

“*God is spirit,*” is a clear statement (John 4:24). Because the one God is manifested in three roles, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, they are necessarily spirit also. Jesus declared that “*a spirit has not flesh and bones*” (Luke 24:40). Our mental imagery is all based on our physical senses making it impossible for us to “visualize” or perceive a spiritual entity. To accommodate our limitations, God is often presented in the Scriptures with human-like qualities like sight, hearing, and emotions. The Scriptures speak of his eyes, ears, hands, and bosom and of being a localized, bodily entity sitting on a throne above some earthly location. Picturing him in such a manner enables us to “see” God, that is, to have some comprehension of him, vague as it must be.

In Jesus God manifested himself in the flesh. The word ‘image’ involves the two ideas of representation and manifestation but not necessarily that of perfection. We cannot see God but he was represented and manifested to us. “*He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born over all creation*” and “*For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him*” (Col. 1:15, 19 NIV). He was “*called ‘Emmanuel’ (which means, God with us)*” (Matt. 1:23). Though God is invisible (1 Tim. 1:17) to the human eye, he has been made known by revelation for “*no one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known*” (John 1:18). To Thomas, Jesus explained, “*If you had known me, you would have known my Father also; henceforth you know him and have seen him. Philip said to him, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the father; how can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me?’*” (John 14:7-9).

Jesus is brought quickly into any study of deity as the paragraph above indicates. This leads us into the puzzling Trinitarian concepts which are questionable. “*For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.*” (1Tim. 2:5). The one (Spirit) God has manifested himself to man through three roles rather than three equal Gods composing the so-called Trinity. Our one universal God has “visited” us as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, all revealing oneness in one deity.

THE PERSONIFIED WORD

“*In the beginning was the Word, and the word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was*

not anything made that was made” (John 1:1-3). You have probably memorized those marvelously majestic and mystifying words, yet their meaning is still subject to much questioning. Without dogmatism, I offer a few thoughts where lengthy discussion would be more appropriate. John’s use of “word” (capitals were added at the discretion of translators) may be taken from Psalm 33:6, “*By the word of the Lord the heavens were made,*” using it as a personification of God’s creative power. A word conveys an idea. By taking fleshly form, God conveyed true concepts of the God of creation to mankind thus reflecting back to his nature in the beginning. When was the beginning? God’s existence had no beginning, so neither did time as we perceive it. I suggest that it relates to the beginning of redemptive history. Jesus was not present in fleshly body then before he was born of woman at a certain point in history. Neither was the “Father” presented in that identity before his Son was born. But through God becoming Father by revelation of himself in Jesus as the son of man and of God, “*the word became flesh and dwelt among us.*” This transpired at Mary’s conception by the Spirit of God and her giving birth to a son. In this context it is revealed, “*No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known*” (John 1:14-18). Jesus was not in some fanciful “spiritualized” flesh and bone body. The eternal, invisible Spirit took up dwelling in a mortal body which could, and would, die. In it true concepts of the one God portrayed in old covenant Scriptures were conveyed. It is worthy of note that neither Matthew, Mark, nor Luke inform of Jesus being a pre-existent God. John’s personification of the word of God evidently was in combating the influence of Greek and Gnostic philosophy.

The invisible Spirit has been present in all ages being made known by his works. To assure people of his presence on Pentecost, for instance, he was accompanied by visible fiery tongues, sound like a strong wind, and men speaking in unlearned languages.

“*Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness..’ . So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them*” (Gen. 1: 26-27). To say that God made them bodily as male and female like his invisible nature would be senseless and contradictory. Although God is referred to in masculine gender, spirit does not possess gender. Male and female genders are for the purpose of procreation. Did a male and female God produce offspring? God did not say, “Let us give birth to man.” So the image (“icon”) is spiritual rather than fleshly.

ACCOMMODATIVE MANIFESTATIONS

He who was in the beginning as Spirit-Deity did not continue in that glorified state for, “*The word (this personification of God –CH) became flesh and dwelt among us*” (John 1:14) in order to manifest himself to man who had only sensory perceptions. Paul tells of him “*Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!*” (Phil. 2:6-8 NIV).

In this state as both the son of man and son of God, he could suffer and die as a human and perform miracles and transfigure his fleshly body. In this nature he could accomplish

spiritual transactions that man could not comprehend through sensory perceptions. How else could mortals comprehend spiritual death and conquest of spiritual death except through physical death and physical resurrection? “*The wages of sin is death,*” not of the body but the spirit. Sin is spiritual and its punishment is spiritual. Jesus accepted our sins and their punishment, making it evident to man in physical representation.

Had a prophet declared that Jesus bore our sins and opened the way back to God by victory over death, how could men have believed that? After seeing him crucified and buried, by seeing him with his scars, eating with him, and talking with him, they could be convinced that he died and then overcame death. Then watching his bodily form disappear in the clouds, they could believe that he had returned to his former state in the unseen spiritual realm in reunion with his Father. But were they to believe that his risen fleshly body stayed in the earthly clouds or that that it returned in flesh to an invisible God? Or was that not to accommodate fleshly limitations of perception?

Jesus had prayed about his return in the night of his betrayal: “*I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began*” (John 17:4-5). Before the incarnation, he had shared the omnipresence of the one invisible God and was then praying to put off that earthly, limiting body and reclaim his previous nature. If that was not accomplished, we have one deity about six feet tall weighing maybe 200 pounds fully visible and another who is an invisible, omnipresent Spirit – the visible limited to a body sitting at the right hand of the invisible, omnipresent deity! A wee bit confusing, would you say?

Please keep these very important matters in mind as we further explore Scriptural teachings about death, resurrection, immortality, and heaven, if the Lord permits. []

(Cecil Hook; October 2005)

P.S.: At this time 1,900 copies of *Free In Christ* are being printed in Nigeria to be distributed mostly in a campaign in Liberia next month. They are given without cost to eager readers. They cost about \$1.25 each to print, and that is enabled by your donations. To this date, 19,130 copies have been printed in Nigeria and Cape Town, and many more books of all my titles have been sent from America. Of the 86,386 copies of *Free In Christ* now in print, 54,800 of them have been given free of charge worldwide. The cry from spiritually hungry disciples in Africa and India is always for more books. Your partnership in this exciting and rewarding ministry is invited.