

THE DEITY OF CHRIST IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

DANIEL DORIANI*

By neglecting the power and pervasiveness of Jesus' indirect claims to deity in the synoptic gospels, evangelicals have given comfort to their theological adversaries and impoverished their own understanding of Jesus' person. Jesus manifested his awareness of his deity throughout his ministry in frequent and varied actions and teachings that rightly issue from God alone.

I. A PLAYGROUND FOR FOOLS?

A few years ago J. A. T. Robinson declared that "the self-consciousness of Jesus . . . has become a sort of 'no go area' for New Testament theology. It has been sealed off as a mine field which none but fools would dare to enter."¹ The evidence bears out Robinson's assessment. For example, the section on Jesus' self-understanding in Wolfhart Pannenberg's *Jesus—God and Man* gives most of its space to Jesus' and Paul's view of the Mosaic law and refrains from genuinely probing Jesus' mind.² Pannenberg's scattered, tentative remarks on Jesus' self-consciousness are agnostic. As Jesus journeys to Jerusalem, Pannenberg opines: "Jesus probably expected that God would, in one way or another, acknowledge him, even in the case of his own failure."³ Within evangelical scholarship the recent *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* lacks an article or even an index heading on Jesus' self-consciousness—and rightly so, at least from an indexer's perspective, for the topic arises only in scattered sentences.⁴ By contrast Friedrich Schleiermacher's 1850 *The Life of Jesus* has two long sections, nearly eighty pages altogether, on Jesus' self-consciousness and his teaching about himself.⁵ In 1920 an uninhibited B. B. Warfield suggested how much could be known about Jesus' interior life in a reverent, lengthy article.⁶

Scholars might defend their reticence to probe Jesus' mind by pleading an absence of hard data. The gospel narrators seldom penetrate the minds

* Daniel Doriani is associate professor of New Testament at Covenant Theological Seminary, 12330 Conway Road, St. Louis, MO 63141

¹ J. A. T. Robinson, *The Priority of John* (Oak Park: Meyer-Stone, 1986) 352

² W. Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977) 251–258

³ *Ibid.* 65

⁴ *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (ed. J. B. Green, S. McKnight and I. H. Marshall, Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992)

⁵ F. Schleiermacher, *The Life of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress) 87–123, 245–286

⁶ B. B. Warfield, "The Emotional Life of Our Lord," *The Person and Work of Christ* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed) 93–145

of the historical figures in their narratives.⁷ When they do, they rarely go deeply into their characters' minds, and Jesus is no exception. We get significant reports on Jesus' motives (Matt 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 20:14; Luke 7:11-15) and on his emotional life (John 11:33; 12:27; 13:21).⁸ But the gospels neither probe nor report on his unvocalized thoughts about himself. They rarely record Jesus' personal reports of his motives (John 12:27). Yet Scripture invites inquiry into the mind of Jesus when Luke says that Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature (2:52) and when Hebrews says that Jesus learned obedience (5:8). Further, the Church could benefit from judicious explorations of these significant aspects of Christology.

II. CRITICAL THOUGHT

The Church also needs to return to the question of Jesus' self-consciousness because critics have not abandoned it. We would need to answer the critics if only because so many students imbibe their theories in our universities. But the Church must examine Jesus' self-consciousness if it wishes to defend his deity. If conservatives waive the issue of Jesus' self-consciousness they forfeit the game to critics who begin discussions of the person of Christ with a Jesus who is vaguely "divine" yet unaware of his deity. Current critical Christologies are limited by two axioms. (1) Jesus cannot be the God-man (truly God, truly man) of Nicene and Chalcedonian orthodoxy. (2) They have also ruled out the sharp disjunction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith that the first quest for the historical Jesus permitted.

When the critics deny creedal Christology and affirm a continuity between the man Jesus and the early Christian message, their discussions are nudged toward a common argument: (1) Jesus lacked self-awareness of deity. He never claimed deity in the sense of preexistence. (2) The Church has called Jesus divine. We are Christians, and we call him divine too. (3) But we must call him divine in a way the historical Jesus would approve. (4) Therefore we deny that he is eternal God, very God of very God. Rather, Jesus is divine in the sense that a consciousness of God was present and revealed in a prototypical way in him. Jesus is divine in that his personality is totally open to God.

While it would be foolhardy to speak of a critical consensus, we can propose John Macquarrie and J. A. T. Robinson as representatives of the contemporary, mainstream, critical mind. Writing on the synoptic witness to Jesus, and especially Mark, Macquarrie observes that we live in a modern, postcritical world.⁹ Unable to return to the naivete of earlier generations of Christians we must apply critical methodologies to the gospels. The gospels

⁷ A Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia Fortress, 1983) 21-26

⁸ Warfield, "Emotional" 93-145

⁹ J Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought* (Philadelphia Trinity Press International, 1990) 70-80

contain both unacceptable notions, such as the existence of angels and demons, and incredible reports, such as the nature miracles of Jesus. Perhaps most difficult of all, we read that Jesus of Nazareth was/is God incarnate—that he, a true man, is also preexistent God. Nonetheless, Macquarrie continues, we are Christians. We reject the fundamentalist allegation that criticism ends in unbelief. Therefore Macquarrie wrestles with the Christology of the NT and the Church. The results of form, source and redaction criticism help him by showing that the gospels were written late in the first century by men who were neither apostles nor eyewitnesses. Further, early-Church theology and legendary accretions constantly seeped into the gospels, so that Macquarrie must doubt any particular saying or incident. He compares the gospels to stories about an outstanding professor from a prior generation circulating years later at his university. Some are true, some false—and, although no one knows which is which, the truth and the error still give a valid picture of the person. “We seem to be in the paradoxical situation of saying that the church has preserved some authentic material about Jesus’ deeds or sayings, but we cannot be sure which.”¹⁰

The unreliability of the sources leads us, Macquarrie continues, to doubt that the strongest claims of Jesus’ deity originated with him. The strongest Christology arises after Easter and is introjected into the life of Jesus by early Christians.¹¹ Upon close reading, Mark’s truest (albeit unconscious) testimony is to the humanity of Jesus and to his reluctance to produce signs of his deity.¹² Moreover, careful reading of the NT shows that most authors say nothing of a preexistent Christ. Mark’s Jesus is divine, but only in the sense that he is the Spirit-filled man.¹³ Similarly Paul’s Jesus is not the preexistent Son of God incarnate as man but the second Adam, the new man “who has transcended the ordinary reaches of humanity” and moves it “into new possibilities.”¹⁴ Preexistence and full equality with God are primarily concerns of John and the later Church.

J. A. T. Robinson, writing on the fourth gospel, shares many presuppositions and conclusions with Macquarrie. He explains the claims of Jesus by giving precedence to his sayings on sonship and servanthood. For example, Jesus’ miracles do not prove him to be God or a divine man because they “are entirely and solely the works of the Father.” In both the synoptics and John “there is no suggestion that he could lay them on because he is God. He is a man of power because he is a man of prayer.”¹⁵ Citing John 6:37; 10:30–38; 17:7, Robinson asserts that Jesus is significant and effective because he is the Father’s agent, the *šālīḥ*, commissioned to act with the sender’s authority. He claims nothing for himself but simply represents God.¹⁶ Robinson correctly notes that all the gospels ask: “Who is this man?”

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 73.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 72–76.

¹² *Ibid.* 78–79.

¹³ *Ibid.* 81.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 48–68, esp. 65–67.

¹⁵ Robinson, *Priority* 349.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 350–352.

Where is he from?" The answer is not, in Robinson's sarcastic phrase, that he is "the invader from another world" but that he is the one who is known and loved by the Father who sent him and told him what to do.¹⁷

Robinson's contention that Jesus neither claimed deity nor preexistence leaves him with some difficult Johannine texts. Robinson's handling of one of them—John 1:18—is instructive: "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only (*monogenēs theos*), who is at the Father's side, has made him known." Some textual variants attend the crucial *monogenēs theos* ("only begotten God"). Strikingly, Robinson concedes it may be the best attested reading in John 1:18 and may even go back to the autograph. But if so, "it was a slip for *huios* (son) . . . and the author would be the first one to correct it."¹⁸ With this kind of conviction it is no wonder that Robinson can swiftly explain, or explain away, numerous texts that appear to disclose Jesus' preexistence (1:15, 30; 8:58; 17:5; 20:28; etc.)—all in eleven pages.¹⁹

Despite their Christology, Macquarrie and Robinson confess with apparent sincerity that they are Christians and believe that Jesus is the Savior. For example, Macquarrie affirms that Jesus' life is a ransom, a sacrifice that saves humanity. Of course, Macquarrie explains, Jesus does not save by giving his life as a ransom paid to the devil or as a propitiation for human sins. Rather, Macquarrie notices that Jesus called himself a servant and that his death was voluntary. He saves by commending "the life of service as opposed to a life of rule and self-assertion." The Christ-event exalts "servanthood and self-emptying above domination and acquisition." The cross requires people to die to the values of the world and become united with Christ in the new life he offers. Jesus' "ransom" on the cross is the "price of human deliverance from enslavement to sin."²⁰ Robinson's soteriology is also essentially functional and ethical. Jesus is the Father's best agent. He is as close to God as a son to his father. He is *monogenēs* because of his total moral unity with the Father. Sin is selfishness, and Jesus saves mankind from it by his example as the one human who was wholly transparent to God.²¹

The critical position, if it still calls itself Christian, must maintain that it has been true to Jesus' concept of himself and his mission and that creedal Christianity has not. This is evident even in a skeptic such as Bultmann. Bultmann grants that the early Church, including the four evangelists, believed that Jesus had a messianic self-consciousness. But Bultmann maintains that they superimposed their beliefs on the "traditional material." The common orthodox argument, Bultmann says, is that the Church could only believe that Jesus is the Messiah if he believed it and represented himself as such, at least to his disciples. But "it is just as possible"—a possibility that Bultmann soon treats as certainty without adding proof—"that belief

¹⁷ Ibid. 357–372.

¹⁸ Ibid. 373.

¹⁹ Ibid. 383–394.

²⁰ Macquarrie, *Jesus* 82–84.

²¹ Robinson, *Priority* 375–378.

in the Messiahship of Jesus arose with and out of belief in his resurrection.²² To support this proposition Bultmann briefly attempts to show that certain messianic passages from the synoptics are either legends or Easter stories projected backwards into Jesus' lifetime. Bultmann attacks some of the strongest claims of deity in the synoptics: Peter's confession, the transfiguration, Jesus' baptism, the entire final week.²³ But, as with Robinson and Macquarrie, the work is done quickly and easily. All apparently think the orthodox position is easily disproved: Criticize John's historical value, reject a few crucial texts from the synoptics, and the work is almost done.

III. EVANGELICAL NEGLECT

Unfortunately, evangelical theology has opened a door to this strategy by neglecting the testimony of the synoptics in the development of their Christologies and relying too heavily on the testimony of John. It makes some sense to rely on John's gospel since it has the most explicit Christology as well as several sustained discussions of it. But with rare exceptions evangelical orthodoxy acts as if it has forgotten how much Christology the synoptics contain, a forgetting that I hope to begin to remedy. I will focus on the synoptics' Christology, defined as the words or deeds whereby Jesus implies that he is God by exercising the functions, assuming the prerogatives, or accepting the honors that properly belong to God alone. I differentiate them from direct claims, such as "Before Abraham was born, I am" and Jesus' approval of Peter's confession, and from "dramatized claims,"²⁴ such as the assertion "I am the resurrection and the life," spoken just before Jesus raised Lazarus.

Evangelical neglect is manifest in the Christology sections of systematic theologies of the last hundred years or more. Charles Hodge's systematics has a long section on the Christology of the OT and on the Christology of John, Paul and Hebrews, but it has nothing on the synoptics' Christology.²⁵ Louis Berkhof included a scant six lines on the deity of Christ in the synoptics in his systematics.²⁶ G. C. Berkouwer's priorities emerge through his citations of Scripture relating to the deity of Christ: OT nine, Hebrews two, Revelation two, Pauline corpus eleven, Matthew thirteen, Mark four, Luke none, John seventy-two.²⁷ Augustus Strong proves Jesus' deity through five passages from John and three from Paul but none from Matthew, Mark or Luke.²⁸ He expounds the offices of Christ through seven passages from John, five from Matthew, none from Mark, one from Luke and four from

²² R Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (New York Scribner's, 1951) 1 26

²³ *Ibid* 26-27

²⁴ The phrase is from J Stott, *Basic Christianity* (Downers Grove InterVarsity, 1958) 21-33

²⁵ C Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1975) 1 483-521

²⁶ L Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (4th ed., Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1979) 317

²⁷ G C Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1954) 154-192

²⁸ A H Strong, *Outlines of Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia American Baptist, 1908) 82-85, 182-206

Paul. Lewis Sperry Chafer also relies on John and Paul in his sections on the deity and preexistence of Christ.²⁹ Chafer has a section on Christ's "evidential mighty works," where one might expect to find synoptic Christology. But only two of twenty-four Scripture passages cited are from the synoptics.³⁰

Recent evangelical systematic theologies show a more balanced appreciation of the NT witness to Jesus' person. Millard Erickson's recent *Christian Theology* has sections on the Christology of John, Hebrews and Paul, but none on the synoptics.³¹ He also discusses the prerogatives Jesus claimed. But his citations are more evenly distributed: Matthew ten, Mark three, Luke three, John fourteen. Gordon Spykman also cites and explains the four gospels' Christology more evenly: Matthew eighteen, Mark two, Luke thirteen, John twenty-one.³² Despite these modest improvements we see that evangelical theology tends to neglect the Christology of the synoptics.

IV. THREE THESES

First, by neglecting Jesus' powerful and pervasive implicit claims to deity in the synoptics, evangelicals have given comfort to their theological adversaries and impoverished their own understanding of Jesus' person. Our neglect has allowed critics to act as if they can secure a picture of Christ as prophet, servant, and man of God by eliminating John's theological reflections and discarding a handful of synoptic texts as post-Easter inventions. Critics like to quote Bultmann's dictum: "There was no Christology before Easter."³³ But the dictum is harder to prove than the critics seem to think. There is more than "a trace" of Christ's preexistence in the synoptics.³⁴ The synoptics constantly express an implicit Christology growing from Jesus' self-consciousness. This Christology so suffuses the synoptics that one cannot alter the gospels' Christology by excising a few "post-Easter insertions." The synoptic testimony is so pervasive that it cannot be ascribed to one source or voice and so separated out from others. Like chromosomes in a cell, like nerve cells in the body, the claims are so embedded in the whole that attempts to root them out would destroy it. If our views of implicit Christology in the synoptics are correct, they undermine the critics' claim to fidelity to early Christian Christology.

Second, Jesus acted out of an awareness of his deity and messiahship throughout his ministry from its beginning to its end. While this awareness

²⁹ L S Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas Dallas Seminary, 1948) 5 7-17, 33-38

³⁰ Ibid 19-22 The citations are Matthew two, Mark none, Luke none, John six, Paul ten, Acts two, Hebrews two, Psalms one, Isaiah one

³¹ M Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids Baker, 1990) 684-693

³² G Spykman, *Reformational Theology A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1992) 395-415

³³ Expressed in Bultmann, *Theology* 1 26-27, and N Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (London SCM, 1967) 78, among others

³⁴ W Bousset, *Kurios Christos Geschichte des Christus-glaubens von den Anfängen des Christentums bis Irenaeus* (1913) 19, quoted in Berkouwer, *Person* 167

is expressed more explicitly in John, most pericopes of the synoptics assert it implicitly.

Third, Jesus manifested his awareness of his deity throughout his ministry by exercising the functions, assuming the prerogatives and accepting the honors that belong to God alone. Once attuned to Jesus' implicit claims to deity, we find that few gospel sections (paragraph clusters or extended pericopes) have no claim to deity. Although the gospels lack reports of Jesus' internal states he constantly acts out of a messianic consciousness, knowing that he is the Messiah, God of very God.

Interest in Jesus' implicit claims is not new. Shedd observed that Jesus' miracles are divine works, to be differentiated from the miracles of the apostles and prophets because performed by his own power and in his own name.³⁵ Chafer also said that Jesus' works prove his deity and preexistence. He listed creating and preserving the world, forgiving sins, raising the dead, and judging the world.³⁶ John Stott shows that Jesus' claims to forgive sins, bestow life, teach the truth, and judge the world all imply his deity.³⁷ Royce Gruenler repeatedly takes up Jesus' implicit claims, putting them in the new perspectives afforded by recent philosophy.³⁸

From outside the evangelical tradition, Pannenberg (citing W. Elert, P. Althaus, E. Brunner and F. Gogarten) has recognized that when Jesus claims to be the Christ he does so on his own authority. The self-authenticating form of the claim enhances its existential potency. Jesus authenticates himself because he knows he can gain nothing by appealing to another, since no higher authority exists. If he were to appeal to another authority he would recognize that it is higher. So by making no appeal he reinforces his claim to be the Christ.³⁹ How then does Jesus implicitly claim deity, and what do his claims signify?

V. JESUS' IMPLICIT CLAIMS TO DEITY

Jesus implicitly claimed deity in at least twelve ways. He claimed three divine rights: (1) to judge mankind, (2) to forgive sins, and (3) to grant eternal life. He declared that (4) his presence was God's presence as well as the presence of God's kingdom and that (5) the attitude people took toward him would determine their eternal destiny. He (6) identified his actions with God's actions, (7) taught the truth on his own authority, and (8) performed miracles on his own authority. He (9) appeared to receive worship or obeisance. He (10) assumed that his life was a pattern for others, a "divinely

³⁵ W G T Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (Grand Rapids Zondervan, n d [1888]) 1 320-322 He also observes that Jesus receives worship, but he fails to cite instances in the synoptics

³⁶ Chafer, *Theology* 5 19-22

³⁷ Stott, *Christianity* 29-32

³⁸ R G Gruenler, *New Approaches to Jesus A Phenomenological and Exegetical Study of Synoptic Christology* (Grand Rapids Baker, 1982)

³⁹ Pannenberg, *Jesus* 53-60 Pannenberg does not believe the claim proves anything by itself The claim has to be vindicated before it is significant

authoritative form of life."⁴⁰ He (11) applied to himself OT texts that describe God and (12) in several parables indirectly identified himself with a father or king who represents God. In nearly every case these implicit claims appear almost silently, without introduction. While I want to focus on those implicit claims that have suffered relative neglect, I must note the more widely studied claims.

1. *Jesus judges mankind.* Jesus claimed to know the thoughts, the inner nature, the hypocrisies of people (Matt 9:4; 12:25; 22:18). Therefore he predicted that he would judge mankind on the last day (7:22–23). He will send his angels to remove evildoers from his kingdom (13:41) and reward each person according to what he has done (16:27). On judgment day he will summon the nations before his throne and pronounce words of eternal weal or woe. Further, the judgment of the wicked begins: "Depart from me, you who are cursed"—implying that the essence of their punishment is not simply separation from God but separation from Jesus (25:34, 41).

2. *Jesus forgave sins.* Jesus explicitly and publicly forgave sins on two occasions that the gospels record (Luke 5:17–26; 7:36–50). He also determined who might and who might not be forgiven (18:9–14). In the first of these events Jesus healed a paralytic who had been lowered through a roof. Jesus was teaching and healing people in a house in Galilee (Mark 2; Luke 5). Pharisees and scribes joined a crowd that swelled beyond the house's capacity. Some friends of a paralytic carried him to Jesus to be healed. Determined to get him to Jesus but blocked by the crowd, they went up on the roof, tied ropes to his mat, tore open a hole in the roof, and lowered the paralytic through it. The eyes and ears of all below converged on the paralytic until Jesus, seeing the faith of the man and his friends, declared: "Friend, your sins are forgiven." Jewish thinking assumed that only an offended party can forgive an offense. Why then should Jesus forgive a man he never met? Because somehow the paralytic had sinned against him. But only God is offended by every sin. So Jesus claims to be God. For a mere man to grant forgiveness to strangers is nonsensical. The Pharisees grasp this and conclude: "This fellow is blaspheming. Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Matt 9:3; Luke 5:21). Jesus, knowing their thoughts, incited a showdown, asking: "Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk?' But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. . . ." Then he said to the paralytic, "Get up, take your mat and go home" (Matt 9:4–6). So Jesus says, in effect, "I have forgiven him, I do claim to be God, and I will prove both by healing him now." Then at Jesus' word the man got up and went home.

3. *Jesus bestowed eternal life.* This claim is most closely associated with John's gospel. Nevertheless in the synoptics Jesus did offer eternal

⁴⁰ Gruenler, *Approaches* 31.

life to the rich young ruler if he sold all and followed him (Mark 10:17–21; Matt 19:16–21; Luke 18:18–22). Jesus also bestowed life when he bestowed the kingdom (Matt 5:3, 10).

4. *Jesus' presence is God's presence.* In Matt 12:6 Jesus said of himself, "One greater than the temple is here." The temple is God's dwelling place. What could be greater than that? Only God himself in the person of Jesus. Similarly Jesus told his disciples he is omnipresent. When they gather to seek direction for purifying the Church he is in their midst (18:20). When they go into the world to make disciples he is with them always (28:18). Further, in himself, Jesus says, the kingdom of God has arrived (Luke 11:14–22; cf. 4:16–21).

5. *The eternal destiny of humans depends on their response to Jesus.* Eternal life comes to those who know Jesus and confess him, to those who are known and confessed by him (Matt 7:21–27; 10:32–33). His disciples must love him more than father or mother, son or daughter, more than life itself. Anyone unwilling to forfeit his life for Christ will lose it forever (10:37–39; 16:24–26; Luke 14:26–27; Mark 8:34–38). By this Jesus summons people to love him more than anyone, to keep his commands even if the keeping entails death. If they know him and publicly confess allegiance to him, they will live forever. If not, they will experience God's eternal wrath.

If an ordinary man said such things he would seem a blasphemer or a madman. But at least for the sympathetic reader they resound as a call to decision. Far from standing over Jesus' claims to evaluate them and him, we are drawn to him by them. When Jesus calls the disciples in the gospels the sympathetic reader feels the call too—to follow Jesus, to imitate him, to lose all for him, and so to gain all.⁴¹

6. *Jesus identified actions toward him with actions toward God.* This claim is also strongest in John, where Jesus claims that knowing him is knowing God (John 8:19), that seeing him is seeing God (12:45; 14:7, 9), that believing him is believing God (12:44; 14:1), that hating him is hating God (15:23).⁴² Yet Matthew sounds similar when Jesus tells his disciples: "He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me" (Matt 10:40). And in Mark Jesus says, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me" (Mark 9:37).

If the first six claims have been amply noted in the past, others lack their due attention. To them we now turn.

7. *Jesus taught the truth on his own authority.* When the OT prophets prophesied they insisted that their message was God's, not their own (Jer

⁴¹ Ibid. 153–155.

⁴² The phrasing is from Stott, *Christianity* 27.

20:7–12; cf. 1:6–8; Amos 7:14–17; cf. 3:8). Hundreds of times they prefaced their message with such phrases as “This is what the Lord says,” “I heard the voice of the Lord,” “The word of the Lord came to me.” Authors of Jewish apocalyptic literature avoided direct claims of authority twice over. First, their work was pseudonymous, put in the mouth of ancient heroes such as Enoch, Ezra or the patriarchs. Second, their message claimed authority because it allegedly originated in a heavenly vision. Jesus knew his teaching had supreme importance: It makes men wise (Matt 7:24), never fails (24:35), and must be taught to the nations (28:18–19). Moreover, unlike the prophets and visionaries Jesus announced that the authority for his message rested in none but himself. Jesus emphasized his authority through the word *amēn*. On over seventy occasions (thirty in Matthew, thirteen in Mark, six in Luke, twenty-five in John) Jesus introduces his teaching by saying *amēn legō hymin* (“Truly I say to you”). Beyond mere emphasis, the *amēn* asserts certainty and potency. When the prophets by contrast say “Thus says the Lord” they deny their personal authority. But Jesus says “Truly I say to you” dozens of times, asserting that his words are certainly true because he says them. He often uses the formula when he corrects errors or is engaged in disputes. For example in Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus, Nicodemus generously—so he thinks—calls Jesus a rabbi and a teacher. But Nicodemus needs to realize that Jesus is more than a rabbi. Jesus proceeds to instruct and correct him, but when he does he does not appeal to the OT Scriptures. Instead he twice draws upon his own authority by saying *amēn, amēn legō hymin* (John 3:3, 5; see also Matt 5:18; 6:2; 18:3; Luke 13:35; John 5:19, 24, 25; 6:26, 32, 47, 53).

Amēn legō hymin also punctuates new teaching, seasoning instruction for which Jesus offers no “proof.” The *amēn* implies that Jesus’ words, like the Father’s, are true simply because he utters them (Matt 24:34; 26:13; Mark 3:28; Luke 12:37; John 10:27). For example, in Matthew 5 Jesus comments on the OT or Jewish interpretations of it six times in the chapter, saying, “You have heard that it was said, . . . but I say to you.” He concludes the first section with the *amēn* in 5:26, asserting that his authority exceeds the Jewish interpreters’. He is the final interpreter of the OT. Without criticizing or correcting it he deepens it, taking it beyond the hands to the heart, on his own authority.

The *amēn* makes sense only if Jesus is God, knows it, and acts accordingly. All people, and especially the teachers of Jesus’ day, tend to support their most striking assertions by quoting authorities. But in the synoptics Jesus never legitimated his teaching by appeal to another authority. Why? Because that would imply that the legitimating authority was higher than Jesus. An appeal to Moses or the prophets could add nothing to Jesus’ message. It would only obscure his authority and deity. So Jesus asseverates by his own authority, by the *amēn legō hymin*, for there is no higher basis for asseveration.

The gospels make the same point in another way: by placing Jesus’ words on the divine side of the chasm between creature and Creator. The OT ascribes God’s own eternity and reliability to the words of Moses and

the prophets. They come from God and so participate in his character. The Lord's word, like the Lord himself, stands forever (Isa 40:6-8; 51:6; Ps 102:25-27). His word accomplishes its purposes, just as the Lord does his (Isa 55:11; 46:9-11). In the sermon on the mount Jesus reaffirms these attributes of the OT law: "For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (Matt 5:18 NRSV). But at the end of the Olivet discourse Jesus uses the same language to ascribe the same divine qualities to his own teaching: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (24:35 NRSV). How does Jesus' teaching acquire this eternity? Unlike the prophets and visionaries, Jesus claims neither divine inspiration nor angelic vision. His words are his own and have authority for that reason (24:34). So Jesus' teaching has the same divine character as God and his words.

We can merely mention Jesus' authoritative teaching on the Sabbath. He repeatedly ignored reams of rabbinic rules on Sabbath observance, again without appeal to other authorities. He delineated proper Sabbath observance in Matt 12:1-8 (cf. Mark 2:23-28) with a few incisive remarks about David in flight and temple ritual. In case the Pharisees mistook his lack of reverence to their rules for ignorance he added: "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath" (Matt 12:8). That is, he will decide what is legal and what fulfills God's will for the Sabbath. But who has the right to declare the one correct interpretation of God's law? God alone. Therefore by claiming to provide the correct interpretation of God's law Jesus asserts his deity.

8. *Jesus performed miracles on his own authority.* The style of Jesus' miracles presents another subtle claim to deity. In the miracles of the OT and Acts, God's agents give credit to the Lord if the issue of credit arises. In the synoptics, however, Jesus does not give credit to the Father. Rather, he implies that he heals by his power, because he wills it and to his praise. In fact Jesus rarely explains his miracles, but his manner invites the idea that he, like God, has power in himself to heal disease and control the forces of nature.⁴³ For example, in the first miracle Matthew and Mark describe in detail a leper approached Jesus, knelt before him, and said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." Jesus reached out his hand and touched the leper. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean." And immediately he was cured of his leprosy (Matt 8:2-3). The pronouns are vital: The leper says, "If you are willing," and Jesus replies, "I am willing," and performs the miracle. The next miracle in Matthew is similar. A centurion comes pleading for his suffering servant. Jesus says simply, "I will go and heal him." There is a discussion of Jesus' agency, but it only shows that Jesus can heal at a distance, hinting at the divine attribute of omnipresence (8:5-13). Much later two blind men, sitting outside Jericho, ask Jesus to have mercy on them. Jesus asks simply: "What do you want me to do for you?"

⁴³ This is not always true of John; see 9:3; 12:38-44.

They ask for their sight, and he grants it (20:29–34). The phrasing of Jesus' dialogue—"I am willing," "I will go," "What do you want me to do?"—implies all three times that Jesus can do whatever he wishes and without consulting anyone. Whether Jesus heals the sick or raises the dead, multiplies food or calms storms, the style in the synoptics remains the same: He neither asks God for power nor ascribes his power to God. The miracles prompt the question: "Who is this?" And Jesus does not seem to mind (8:27; 14:33; John 6:14; 7:31).

In the OT, miracle-workers speak differently. Consider, for example, the time the Israelites in the desert demanded water from Moses (Exod 17:2). When asked for water Moses deflected attention from himself, saying, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the Lord to the test?" Then he prayed to God, confessing that only he could answer their request (17:2–4). Similarly when the men of Jericho petitioned Elisha to heal their bad water (2 Kgs 2:19) Elisha told them that the Lord had decided to heal it (2:21). Again, when Elijah provided food for the widow at Zarephath he explained it as God's decision and action (1 Kgs 17:14). Likewise, facing the fiery furnace, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego confessed that God might or might not deliver them, as he willed (Dan 3:17–18). Similarly the apostles Peter and John heal in the name of Jesus and assert that the power came from Jesus, the Holy and Righteous One (Acts 3:6–16). Later when the Lystrans think Paul and Barnabas might be gods they are horrified and shout that they are only messengers of the living God (14:8–18). God's agents defer to him, but Jesus does not defer.

To be more precise, God's agents do not always give him the credit. Moses did it in another way once, in the desert of Zin. There the Israelites quarreled with Moses once again about the lack of water. God told Moses to speak to a certain rock that would pour out water for all. This one time Moses called attention to himself, saying, "Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?" Then he raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. For the sin of claiming the glory of God for himself, for dishonoring him, the Lord banned Moses from the promised land (Num 20:2–12). Why then is Jesus never censured for failing to honor God in his miracles? Because he does honor God when he allows honor to come to himself.

On one occasion Elisha also behaved as Jesus did habitually, but the exception may confirm our rule. When a member of the company of prophets died, his wife became destitute so that their children were about to become slaves (2 Kgs 4:1–7). Hearing of her plight, Elisha says simply, "How can I help you?" He then proceeds to meet her need by multiplying her oil. I propose that Elisha says "How can I help you?" without reference to God because, as the wife of a prophet, she would not need to be reminded that the miracle came from God.⁴⁴ A private miracle need not be interpreted to a

⁴⁴ "Propose" because I offer no proof, nor can I, beyond saying that my proposal appears to be a simple and complete explanation of the data at hand. It especially accounts for Moses being punished for what appears to be the same act as Elisha's.

knowledgeable woman. But the apostles and the prophets present public miracles (excluding Moses' error) as acts of God, lest someone misunderstand the human agents' role. Why then does Jesus never ascribe the power and the praise to God in the synoptic accounts, not even in public miracles performed among the ignorant? Because he deemed it unnecessary.

Jesus' manner is singular in its simplicity. Unlike the prophets and apostles he neither prayed to the Father nor gave him glory. Unlike putative Hellenistic miracle-workers of the era he used no rituals, no incantations, no evening vigils. Jewish literature implies that miracle-working rabbis of the era were effective because God heard their prayers. Jesus almost never prayed before his miracles.⁴⁵ If we ask why Jesus acts as he does, the answer is simply: "Because I choose to, because I am who I am." His willingness is pure, neither motivated nor explained by forces outside himself.⁴⁶ When petitioned he simply says, "I am willing, I will go, I will do it." Void of pride or egotism, neither is Jesus self-effacing. His manner resembles only that of Yahweh, who sends Moses on a mission with the "explanation" that "I AM WHO I AM" has sent him. Again, he is like Yahweh in Leviticus, who "explains" his commands: "I am the LORD."

9. *Jesus received obeisance.* The gospels do not demonstrate that Jesus received worship in the fullest sense before his resurrection.⁴⁷ Certainly we must not leap to conclusions when we read the words "Lord" or "bow down" in the gospels. Yet the gospels hint that people give him an homage that transcends the normal range of human social relations. When joining such hints with the gospels' other hints of Jesus' deity, the perceptive reader at least wonders if he witnesses worship. Observe, first, that many "fall" or "bow" before Jesus in the synoptics and he never tells them to get up (Mark 5:27, 33; Luke 5:8 *et al.*). We cannot call each instance an act of worship. Demons fall before Christ (Mark 3:11; 5:6; Luke 8:28), but they do not worship. We cannot assert that the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17) or the mocking soldiers (15:19) or even the Syrophenician woman (7:25) fell down in worship. On the other hand, falling to one's knees or face is sometimes an act of worship in the

⁴⁵ Hellenistic miracles are fraught with magic, spells and rituals. See H C Kee, *Miracles in the Early Christian World* (New Haven Yale University, 1983) 78–145, more briefly D Graham, "Jesus as Miracle Worker," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 4 (1986) 85–96. Scholars debate whether many rabbis performed miracles or not. Strong claims exist for just two: Hanina ben Dosa, and Honi the Circlemaker/Rainmaker. Rabbinic sources see their miracles as answers to their prayers—hence very different from those of Jesus, who prayed only before raising Lazarus and for the benefit of the crowd (John 11:42). John seems to grant Jesus' command—"Lazarus, come out"—at least as much weight as his prayer. In recent years both critical and conservative scholars have affirmed the uniqueness of the accounts of Jesus' miracles. See H Van Der Loos, *The Miracles of Jesus* (Leiden Brill, 1965) 139–155, G H Twelftree, "ΕΙ ΔΕ ΕΓΩ ΕΚΒΑΛΩ ΤΑ ΔΑΙΜΟΝΙΑ," *Gospel Perspectives The Miracles of Jesus* (ed D Wenham and C Blomberg, Sheffield JSOT, 1986) 6:383–386, C Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove InterVarsity, 1987) 80–92.

⁴⁶ Gruenler, *Approaches* 156.

⁴⁷ R T France, "The Worship of Jesus," *Christ the Lord* (ed H H Rowden, Downers Grove InterVarsity, 1982) 26.

NT, at least in the book of Revelation (1:17; 5:8, 14; 19:10; 22:8 *et al.*). Even in the gospels, falling is presented as an act of worship at the transfiguration (Matt 17:6), after the resurrection (28:9; Luke 24:52), in Satan's temptation of Christ (Matt 4:9, *piptō* and *proskyneō*; Luke 4:7-8, *proskyneō* alone), and perhaps in the adoration of the Magi (Matt 2:11) and Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane (26:39). But is it ever an act of worship when supplicants fall before Jesus when they meet him under fairly ordinary circumstances?

The gospels suggest, if not assert, that some who bowed before Jesus came in a spirit of worship, at least in a vague or inchoate sense. The story of the ten healed lepers in Luke 17 illustrates the point. Of the ten only one, a Samaritan, returned to thank Jesus: "One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan. Jesus asked, 'Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?' Then he said to him, 'Rise and go; your faith has made you well'" (17:15-19). The order of events is vital. First, the leper prostrated himself before Christ, taking both the position and the diction (if not the full attitude) of a worshiper. Next, Jesus asked three questions. Only later did Jesus invite him to rise. We know that neither men nor angels who fear God can bear to see a fellow creature bowing before them or giving them homage (Acts 14:8-15; Rev 22:8-9). But Jesus allowed the leper—and others on other occasions—to remain at his feet while they praised God for his mighty deeds. The scene would be most odd if Jesus were not God. It only fails to trouble us today if we are already familiar with the story and/or if we already believe Jesus is the Christ. But if Jesus were not God he ought to be asking people to rise before he converses with them.

Our case becomes stronger if we notice that in the NT no one successfully falls or bows down for any reason, before any personal being, except for Jesus.⁴⁸ People do bow and worship Jesus in the gospels and Revelation. But when humans try to worship created beings in the NT a stiff rebuke greets them on each occasion (Acts 14:14-18; Rev 19:10; 22:8).⁴⁹

10. *Jesus assumed that his life was a pattern for others.* Jesus had to deny his family. A disciple must too (cf. Luke 8:19-21 with 14:25-26). Jesus had to live without a home, and therefore a disciple shall be homeless (9:57-58). Jesus refrained from fasting, and therefore his disciples refrain (cf. Matt 11:19 with 9:14-17). Not only was Jesus going to the cross, but also his journey means that the disciples must go too, at least in principle (16:21-26). Strikingly, Jesus even offered himself as an example to his opponents on occasion. In the long discussion of table fellowship in Luke 14-15 Jesus told his host, a Pharisee, that he should invite the poor,

⁴⁸ Unless one counts the parable of the unforgiving servant, where two servants fall down in homage (Matt 18:26, 29).

⁴⁹ France suggests two different texts where disciples may be worshipping Jesus: Matt 14:33; John 9:38 ("Worship" 27).

the crippled, the lame and the blind to his next dinner party (14:13). In the next scene he showed them how to do it: by welcoming and eating with undesirables (15:1–2).

The point is not that Jesus commands his disciples to imitate him but that he assumes it, just as he assumes that they will imitate his Father in heaven (Matt 5:44–45). The absence of argumentation is telling. But contrast Paul, who also expects disciples to follow his example (1 Cor 4:14–17; 2 Thess 3:6–9), acts self-consciously, commanding Christians to imitate him and explaining why they should. The gospels, however, assume that disciples ought to do what Jesus does, according to their human abilities, simply because he does it and without further explanation.

11. *Jesus applied to himself OT texts that describe God.* After the triumphal entry the Jewish leaders complain to Jesus that the children of Jerusalem are welcoming him with cries of “Hosanna to the Son of David.” Jesus replies by quoting Ps 8:2: “From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise.” Since Psalm 8 is addressed “O LORD, our Lord,” Jesus is applying an OT passage about God to himself.⁵⁰ Again, in the parable of the wicked tenants Jesus’ climactic rebuke of the Jews states that they will fall on a stone and be shattered, an image apparently taken from Isa 8:14–15 where the Lord of Israel is the stone on which Israel will fall. When Jesus declares that heaven and earth will pass away before his words pass away (Matt 24:35; Mark 13:31; Luke 21:33) he claims that his words have the same permanence as God’s (Isa 40:8).

12. *Jesus is a divine figure in his own parables.* This point depends on the view, recently given rigorous theoretical grounding by C. Blomberg, that parables often have allegorical elements.⁵¹ Specifically, in complex parables the father, king, master or shepherd is often a God-like character, and faithful and unfaithful subjects often resemble those who are or are not faithful to God.⁵² If Jesus’ parables do indeed use this strategy, then Jesus often identifies himself with the divine figure in his parables. The proof takes several steps.

First, Jesus is often a figure in his own parables. In the companion parables of the sower and the wheat and the weeds (Matt 13:1 ff.) Jesus implies that he is the sower. The parable describes what happens when anyone speaks or hears the word (13:19). Since Jesus is speaking the word at that moment, the parable describes him. If this seems subtle, Jesus overtly identifies himself as the sower and the owner of the farm in the immediately following parable about the wheat and the weeds: “The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. . . . The Son of Man will send out his angels and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil” (13:37, 41).

⁵⁰ R. T. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989) 310.

⁵¹ C. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990) 36–57.

⁵² Incidentally, several of these figures are used to describe God in the OT.

Jesus explicitly identified himself as a character in only these two parables, but he encouraged his hearers to see him in several other parables. For example, the parable of the wicked tenant farmers let its audience see the owner of the vineyard as God, the tenants as the rebellious Jews, and Jesus as the son of the owner, whom the wicked tenants throw out of the vineyard and kill. The Jewish leaders certainly took the parable that way, and Jesus never corrected them (Luke 20:19; Matt 21:45–46).⁵³

Jesus is also the leading character in three parables about the time of his return in Matthew 24–25. Jesus has just told his disciples that no one but the Father knows the hour of the return of the Son of Man (24:36, 37, 39, 42, 44). He adds: “So you must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him” (24:44). He then tells two parables in which the leading characters, a master and a bridegroom, come when the other characters do not expect him (24:45–51; 25:1–13). The master and the bridegroom in the stories do precisely what Jesus said the Son of Man would do. So the text encourages the careful hearer or reader to identify the characters (who arrive at an unexpected hour) with Jesus, the Son of Man (who will come at an unexpected hour).

Next, in the parable of the talents Jesus plays a divine role. In it the master goes on a long journey, entrusting his wealth to three servants, then returns to settle accounts, rewarding the faithful and punishing the unfaithful (25:14–30). Jesus explains: “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people from one another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats” (25:31). Notice the similarity: The Son of Man (Jesus’ favorite self-designation) reviews all flesh and settles all accounts. The master in the parable of the talents reviewed his servants and settled accounts with them. So Jesus tells a parable in which the chief character does what he does. And what they both do is God’s work: They judge mankind.

Jesus’ strategy is often more elusive, as we see in the parable of the “prodigal son” or the “lost sons” (Luke 15:11–32).⁵⁴ The Pharisees prompt the parable by criticizing Jesus for welcoming and eating with sinners. Jesus responds with a series of analogies (15:3–32). If a shepherd had a hundred sheep and lost one he would look for it and rejoice over the discovery, would he not? Likewise there is rejoicing in heaven, in the presence of God, over one lost sinner who repents. And a woman with ten coins would search diligently for one she lost and rejoice in the finding, would

⁵³ This decoding is very widely accepted by scholars. See C E B Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Cambridge, 1977) 367–368, J Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Scribner’s, 1972) 70–76, H N Ridderbos, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 397–402.

⁵⁴ Other subtle identifications occur in the parable of the great banquet (Luke 14 16–24), the shepherd seeking the lost sheep (15 3–7), the stronger man in the parable of the binding of the strong man (Mark 3 22–27), the minas (Luke 19 11–26), the workers in the vineyard (Matt 20 1–16) and, more adventurously, the good Samaritan (Luke 10 25–37). Blomberg’s “rule of proportional analogies,” stating that potential allegorical elements of a parable should be cast in the form “A is to B as a is to b with respect to x,” can check unbridled allegorizing (*Parables* 46).

she not? Likewise there is rejoicing in heaven over one lost sinner who repents. Similarly a father would (or should) welcome a lost son, even if he were a sinner, if he came home safe and penitent. In the third analogy the rejoicing takes place on the farm, not in heaven, but Jesus has already established that Heaven—a circumlocution for God⁵⁵—rejoices over the return of a sinner. The point of the parable is that God, represented by the father in the story, rejoices over returning sinners.

Jesus' reply to the Pharisees, his defense of his associations, seems complete: Jesus welcomes sinners because God welcomes them. When Jesus associates with sinners (15:1–2) he is God's agent, calling sinners to repentance and welcoming them back into the kingdom. But the third parable has a twist. Although there is no apparent need for it, the parable continues after the third answer to the Pharisees. Jesus creates a new character, the older brother—a self-righteous, rude and indignant figure who resembles a Pharisee in his refusal to celebrate a sinner's return. The god-like father tries to persuade his older son to join the festivities. Gently and persuasively he admonishes his son's faults, assuages his anger, and appeals to his humanity. But we never learn how the older brother responded. Jesus leaves the story open-ended so the Pharisees could finish it themselves, for they are much like the older brother in their rejection of sinners.

Now the implicit claim to deity emerges. When Jesus created the parables of Luke 15 he did in the real world what the father did in the story world. Through his parable Jesus invited the Pharisees to join the celebrations he had with sinners, just as the father invited the older brother to join the celebration for his sinful brother. Precisely like the father in the story, Jesus gently rebuked on the one hand and invited on the other. Like the father in the parable, like God in heaven, he awaited their reply. So Jesus made himself a divine figure in his own parable and so implicitly claimed deity.

The parable of the unforgiving servant is similar if simpler (Matt 18:23–35). Jesus tells the parable to motivate Peter and the other disciples to forgive one another “seventy times seven” (18:21–22) by showing them that God has forgiven them much more. In the parable a debtor appears before a king with a debt of ten thousand talents, the equivalent of two hundred thousand years' wages for a common worker (perhaps two billion dollars in modern terms).⁵⁶ He pleads, absurdly, for more time to repay it, but the master forgives the debt, now termed a loan, and lets him go. But due to his subsequent failure to forgive a much smaller debt for his fellow servant the slave later faces the king's wrath.

⁵⁵ Jeremias, *Parables* 38–40, 135.

⁵⁶ Ten thousand talents equals two hundred thousand years' wages (one talent = twenty years' wages). If we assume a wage of five dollars per hour and forty hours of work, fifty weeks a year, the result is two billion dollars. Of course there are other ways of calculating the sum that yield much lower figures.

The king is God, Jesus explains at the end of the parable (18:35). Like God, the king calls men to account for their debts to him. Like God, the king has power to forgive and to punish. But the context shows that Jesus has the same powers. He calls men to account (the parable exists in part to call Peter to account). He can forgive sins, the vast debts of mankind, by a word, as we have seen (Luke 5:17-26; 7:36-50), and by the cross, as that generation would soon see. He also has the power to punish (Matt 25:31-46). Once again, therefore, Jesus does what the king, a godlike figure in the story, does. He makes himself a godlike figure in his own parable, and so implicitly claims deity.⁵⁷

VI. CONCLUSION

Conservative theologians and students of the NT have largely overlooked Jesus' indirect claims in the synoptics, simplifying the work of critics who assert that there was no Christology before Easter. This neglect also impoverishes evangelicals' understanding of Jesus' self-awareness.

We have found that Jesus indirectly claimed deity in at least twelve ways, and on many occasions, throughout the synoptics. He asserted his deity by exercising the functions, assuming the prerogatives, or accepting honors that properly belong to God alone. He advanced every type of claim at least twice, and some of them dozens of times. He made them throughout his ministry, from his first words (Matt 5:17-46; Mark 2:23-28; Luke 4:18-27) and first works in Galilee (5:12-26; Mark 1:40-2:12; Matt 8:1-13) to his last words on the cross (Luke 23:43). No sane Jewish man of the time could have staked all these claims by accident. Jesus, unable to state his identity directly due to the strictures of his ministry, left instead a record of loudly whispered hints. Delivered regularly and with ease, they rose naturally from Jesus' continuous self-consciousness of his deity.

⁵⁷ For more see P. B. Payne, "Jesus' Implicit Claim to Deity in His Parables," *Trinity Journal* 2 (1981) 3-23; Blomberg, *Parables* 314-323; Jeremias, *Parables* 132.