

# The Claim of Christ

by W.H. Griffith Thomas

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*W.H. Griffith Thomas explores the profound claims of Christ as Messiah, Redeemer, Master, Judge, and God, emphasizing their significance for humanity.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 3:15, Matthew 16:17, John 4:26, John 5:18, John 10:30, John 10:33, John 14:9, John 14:11, John 14:26, John 19:7

**Topics:** "Christology", "Divine Authority"

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## Description

W.H. Griffith Thomas delves into the multifaceted claims of Jesus Christ, highlighting His self-proclaimed roles as the Messiah of the Jews, the Redeemer of Mankind, the Master of Mankind, the Judge of Mankind, and even claiming the prerogatives of God Himself. These claims, supported by His distinctive titles like 'Son of Man' and 'Son of God,' challenge believers to ponder the unique consciousness of Christ and the weight of His divine identity. Despite His humility, Jesus asserted unparalleled authority and relationship with God, leaving humanity with the profound dilemma of acknowledging Him as either God or not a good man.

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## Transcript

Just as a diamond has several facets, each one contributing to the beauty and attractiveness of the complete stone, so Jesus Christ can be considered in various ways, and to the question, "What think ye of Christ?" different answers can be given. Looking again at the Gospel story of His life, we are conscious of one remarkable fact that stands out on almost every page from the beginning to the close of His ministry. This is the claim that He made for Himself. It was a fivefold claim of a very far-reaching nature.

He claimed to be the Messiah of the Jews. It is well known that the Old Testament is a book of expectation, and that it closes with the expectation very largely unrealized. The Jews as a nation were ever looking forward to the coming of a great personage whom they called the Messiah. He would fulfill all their prophecies, realize all their hopes, and accomplish all their designs for themselves and for the world. Jesus Christ of Nazareth claimed to be this Messiah. During His ministry He referred to many a passage in the Old Testament, and pointed to Himself as the explanation and application of it.

He took the Jewish law and claimed not only to fulfill it, but to give it a wider, fuller, and deeper meaning. "I came not to destroy, but to fulfill." It was this definite claim to be the Messiah that led in great part to the opposition shown to Him by the Jews. He claimed to be in some way the Redeemer of Mankind. "The Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which is lost"; "The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto,

but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many."

This description of men as "lost," i.e. helpless, useless, and in danger of future condemnation, and this statement about Himself as having come to "save" them, constitute a claim that implies uniqueness of relation to humanity. He claimed to be the Master of Mankind. He said that He was the Lord of the Sabbath. He called for obedience from men by His definite, all-embracing command, "Follow me." The earliest influence of Christ over His disciples was exercised quite naturally and simply, and yet the claim He made on them was absolute.

But the narrative nowhere suggests that they felt it to be unwarranted. It is recorded without any explanation or justification, as though He had a natural and perfect right to make it. The words are so familiar that we are apt to fail to realize their astounding and far-reaching character. Think of what they mean. "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me." "He that loseth his life for my sake shall find it." This remarkable claim to control lives and to be the supreme motive in life is surely more than human.

He preached the kingdom of God, and announced Himself as the King. He claimed to alter the law in spite of the sanction of its hoary authority. Still more, He claimed to be the Judge of Mankind. He said that His words should judge mankind at the last day, and more than once He depicted Himself as the Judge before whom all men should be gathered to receive their reward or punishment. He claimed to sum up all the past and to decide all the future. Above all, He claimed nothing less than the prerogatives of God.

He claimed to be able to forgive sins, eliciting from His enemies a charge of blasphemy, since "Who can forgive sins but God only?" He associated Himself with God and God's work when He said, "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work." He told the Jews that all things had been delivered to Him by His Father, and because of this He invited all that labored and were heavy laden to come to Him for rest. The words of St. Matthew 11 call for the closest possible study. "All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father: neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him.

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." The fair and obvious interpretation of this statement is that Jesus Christ was conscious of a unique relation to God and a unique relation to man based thereon. Is not this the New Testament picture of Jesus Christ? Can anyone doubt as they read the four Gospels, or even the first three Gospels, that this, and nothing short of it, is the claim that Jesus Christ made for Himself as Messiah, Redeemer, Master, Judge, and God?

But we cannot stop with a general consideration of these remarkable claims; we must get behind them and endeavor to discover whether they are warranted by our Lord's personal consciousness. To claim is one thing; to justify and vindicate the claim is quite another. Character and deeds must bear the strain of this stupendous claim to be unique in relation to God and man. Now it is worthy of note that during recent years the minds of the greatest thinkers have been turning as never before to the consideration of the consciousness of Christ.

"The Inner Life of Jesus" is the theme of modern books of great value issued in Germany and in England. The one aim that runs through them is the inquiry whether the consciousness of Jesus Christ can bear the weight of the tremendous claim which the Gospels show He made for Himself. The writers realize that the consciousness of Christ is the foundation of these claims, and that if that is wanting, the claims themselves are baseless. It is, therefore, with a sure instinct and insight that men have been giving

attention to the consciousness of Christ examining it, testing it, and proving it to the utmost.

The more it is studied the better, for the more fully it is examined the more thoroughly will it be found to stand the test. Now there is one way in particular in which this consciousness may be tested. It may be studied by dwelling on the distinctive titles He used and allowed to be used for Himself. As Dr. Sanday rightly says, "The problem still turns round the use of those old names, Son of Man, Son of God, Messiah." [Sanday, *Life of Christ to Recent Research*, p. 123.] "Son of Man" is a title found eighty times in the Gospels, sixty-nine in the Synoptics, and eleven in the fourth Gospel.

It is found in every document into which criticism divides our present Gospels. [Sanday, *op. cit.*, p. 125.] While its origin is variously explained, its meaning on our Lord's lips is not difficult of apprehension. It is employed by Ezekiel as a designation of himself, some ninety times; it is used occasionally in the Psalms of man in general (e.g. Psa. 8:4, 80:17) and it is found in a well-known passage in Daniel (7:13) with an eschatological reference to the Messiah. It is also in Enoch and second Esdras, if the passages are pre-Christian.

But it does not seem to have been used by the Jews for the Messiah before Christ came, and in the New Testament, with two exceptions, it is only found on the lips of Christ Himself. The Evangelists never use it to describe their Master. It was His own designation of Himself as Messiah, and was probably derived partly from the Old Testament and partly from His own consciousness. There is ample material in the Old Testament for the germ from which it sprang, and, as Dr. Sanday says, our Lord invariably added to and deepened every Old Testament conception that He adopted. [Sanday, *Life of Christ in Recent Research*, p. 127.]

It seems to suggest at once His lowliness and His Lordship, His oneness with humanity, and His uniqueness in humanity. He is the real, representative, typical Man, and the term is practically equivalent to Messiah, though it was not recognized as such in our Lord's time. The usage of the term in the Gospels may be said to fall into the two groups corresponding with the Old Testament representations of the Messiah, His lowliness as the Servant of Jehovah, and His Lordship as God's Vicegerent.

These two lines of Old Testament prophecy and anticipation never meet in the Old Testament itself, and it is only in Jesus Christ that the problem of their remarkable contrast is resolved and explained. While, therefore, Jesus Christ generally avoided the term "Messiah" because of the false ideas associated with it by the Jews, He found in the designation "Son of Man" a true explanation of His own Messianic consciousness and mission which it at once asserted and concealed. Thus, as Holtzmann says, "It was a riddle to those who heard it, and served to veil, not to reveal, His Messiahship." [Quoted by Sheraton, *Princeton Theological Review*, October, 1903.]

"Son of God" is another title closely related to the former. Each implies and explains the other. Its usage is not large in the Gospels. While in the Synoptics there is no explicit use of the title by Christ Himself, He employs it by implication, and certainly allows others to use it of Him. He speaks of God as "the Father" many times, but in regard to His relation to God He never associates Himself with men. Not once do we find Him speaking of "Our Father" as including Himself; it is always "My Father" and "your Father".

In the same way He is never found praying with His disciples, though He does praise with them (St. Mark 14:26). Surely there is something like uniqueness here. The title "Son of God" is given to Him under a great variety of circumstances, and doubtless with a great variety of meaning, but a careful study of a number of passages compels the conclusion that, amid all the differences of circumstance and meaning,

"an essential filial relation to God" is the only true interpretation (Matt. 11:27, 16:16, 17:25, 22:41-45, 27:43, Luke 10:22). [See Fairbairn, *Studies in the Life of Christ*, p. 193.]

In the fourth Gospel we have one hundred and four instances of Christ calling God "Father" or "the Father," and the title "Son of God" is frequently employed, both by Himself and others (1:14-18, 3:16-18, 20:17). The usage is therefore clear and outstanding, and calls for explanation. What, then, does it mean? The term is found in the Old Testament as applied to Israel (Exod. 4:22), and to the Kings of Israel (Psa. 89:26-27), and in the second Psalm in particular a Messianic application also seems clear (verse 7).

But while it undoubtedly has an official sense, it is obvious from the usage in the Gospel that it meant much more. The Messianic meaning was the basis of an ethical and metaphysical idea that went far beyond anything purely official (St. John 5:18, 10:33, 19:7). The Jews clearly realized the difference between their own idea of the Sonship of the Messiah and that which Jesus claimed for Himself. This witness of the Gospels to a unique Divine Sonship is a fact to be pondered and explained.

It is impossible to avoid the force and variety of their testimony on this point: Copious as it is, the language ... is all the development of a single idea. It all grows out of the filial relation; it is a working out of the implications of the title Son of God. The idea, as we have seen, rests upon evidence that is far older than the fourth Gospel. It would not be wrong to call it the first proposition of Christian theology, the first product of reflection upon the Life of Christ that has come down to us.

The most detailed analysis of the idea is no doubt to be found in the fourth Gospel; but that Gospel really adds nothing fundamentally new. When once we assume that our Lord Jesus Christ thought of Himself as Son, thought of Himself as the Son, thought of God as in a peculiar sense His Father, or the Father, all the essential data are before us. [Sanday, *The Life of Christ in Recent Research*, p. 137.] That Jesus believed Himself to be the Messiah is another fact that emerges from a careful reading of the Gospels.

At the baptism it is evident that Christ was conscious of His Messiahship (Matt. 3:15). The name Messiah was frequently applied to Jesus Christ by others. There are three occasions in which He accepted it for Himself (Matt. 16:17, Mark 14:61, John 4:26). And although He refused from time to time to reveal Himself to the Jews, who were only too ready to mistake His words and oppose His claim, the evidence of the Gospels is far too weighty to allow of any denial of the Messiahship of Jesus Christ as claimed, allowed, and implied by Him.

Some critics have called in question the fact that Jesus called Himself Messiah. But this article of evangelical tradition seems to me to stand the test of the most minute investigation. [Harnack, *History of Dogma*, i. p. 63, n.] Historically considered, the calling which Jesus embraced, and with which was bound up His significance for the world, was and could be no other than to be the Messiah of His people. [Weiss, *Life of Christ*, i. p. 195.] As Dr. Sanday truly says - There is no explaining away this deep-rooted element in the consciousness of our Lord.

On this rock the persistent efforts to minimize the significance of His Person must assuredly be shipwrecked. [Sanday, *The Life of Christ in Recent Research*, p. 136.] On these three titles, therefore, and all that they express and imply, we can concentrate attention. When they are considered, first separately, and then together in their mutual relations, they surely carry their own message as to the claim and consciousness of Christ in regard to Himself, His Father, and His mission.

They reveal to us what Dr. Sanday has so well called: Those little indications - for they are really little indications, strangely delicate and unobtrusive - scattered over the Gospels, that in spite of the humble form of His coming, He was yet essentially more than man. Let me ask you to observe how it is all in keeping. It is in keeping with what I have already called the period of "occultation". Everything about the Manhood of our Lord is (so to speak) in this subdued key.

But this is only for a time. It expresses the surface consciousness, not the deeper consciousness; the deeper consciousness, after all, is expressed by St. John's "I and My Father are one." It is the unclouded openness of the mind of the Son to the mind of the Father that was the essence of His being. It is not only openness to influence, but a profound, unshakable inner sense of harmony, and indeed unity, of will. This is the fundamental fact that lies behind all our theologizings.

They are but the successive efforts to put into words, coloured, perhaps, by the different ages through which the Church has passed, what St. Thomas meant by his exclamation, "My Lord and my God." [Sanday, *The Life of Christ in Recent Research*, p. 141.] This Divine consciousness is all the more remarkable when it is considered against the background of His perfect humility. We see Him occupied with His own personality, and yet proclaiming and exemplifying meekness on every possible occasion.

But, if His claims were untrue, is there not something here that is not merely egotism, but blasphemy? It is doubly surprising to observe that these enormous pretensions were advanced by one whose special peculiarity, not only among His contemporaries, but among the remarkable men that have appeared before and since, was an almost feminine tenderness and humility. Yet so clear to Him was His own dignity and infinite importance to the human race as an objective fact with which His own opinion of Himself had nothing to do, that in the same breath in which He asserts it in the most unmeasured language, He alludes, apparently with entire unconsciousness, to His own humility: "I am meek and lowly in heart." [Masterman, *Was Jesus Christ Divine?* p. 63.]

Since, too, He claimed to bring God to man in a definite and unique way, and to bestow such grace as would transform and uplift man's life, the question naturally arises whether such an One as Jesus Christ would arouse hopes in man that He could not satisfy. Bronson Alcott once said to Carlyle that he could honestly use the words of Jesus, "I and the Father are one." "Yes," was the crushing retort, "but Jesus got the world to believe Him." [Religion and the Modern Mind. David Smith, "The Divinity of Jesus," p. 167.]

And so we have to face and explain this Divine consciousness of Christ. As Canon H. B. Ottley has truly put it, this is the "Great Dilemma," and a dilemma which takes various forms. Christ was sinless, and yet was condemned as a malefactor. He was the Truth, and yet was condemned for falsehood. He came fulfilling the law, and yet was condemned as a lawbreaker. He claimed to be a King, and yet was condemned as a traitor. He was a worker of miracles, and yet was condemned as a sorcerer.

He claimed to be a forgiver of sins, and yet was condemned as an impostor. He claimed to be God, and yet was condemned as a blasphemer. [H. B. Ottley, *The Great Dilemma*, passim.] Was ever a human being seen like this? A Man exemplifying the passive virtues combined with unique majesty. A man challenging attention to His sinlessness and meekness, and yet obviously sincere. A man claiming unlimited power, and yet ever expressing His dependence on God. A Man possessed of undaunted courage, and yet characterized by exceptional meekness.

A Man interested in the smallest details of individual lives, and yet conscious of possessing universal relations with God and man. A Man deeply impressed with the awful realities and consequences of human

sin, and yet ever possessed by a sunny optimism which faced the facts and looked forward to sin's eternal destruction. A Man born and educated amid narrow and narrowing Jewish tradition, and yet characterized by an originality and a universality which rises infinitely above all national and racial limits.

A Man of perfect humility, absolute sincerity, entire sinlessness, and yet all the while actually asserting Himself to be humble, sincere, and sinless. A young man who had not long left the carpenter's workshop, who at the moment He spoke was in a condition of poverty, and was associated only with those who were obscure and poor like Himself, calmly declared His sense of perfect faultlessness and of extraordinary relation to God. [Young, *The Christ of History*, p. 211.] What are we to say in the face of these astonishing claims?

How are we to reconcile this self-assertion on the one hand with that high degree of personal character and excellence which all men, friends and foes, have accorded to Jesus Christ throughout the ages? How is it that these claims which would be absolutely intolerable in any other man have been allowed and almost universally accepted in the case of Jesus Christ? Surely there is only one conclusion to all this; the old dilemma must once more be repeated, *Aut Deus aut homo non bonus*.

Either Jesus Christ is God, or else He is not a good man. "If it is not superhuman authority that speaks to us here, it is surely superhuman arrogance." [An Appeal to Unitarians, quoted by Bishop Gore, *The Incarnation* (Bampton Lecture), p. 238.] There is no middle path, for no intermediate position has ever been found tenable. Jesus Christ is either God, or else He is utterly undeserving of our thought and regard. We therefore find ourselves face to face with the problem how to account for the Person, life, and character of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

As it has been forcibly pointed out, the ordinary factors of life cannot possibly account for Him. Race, family, place, time, education, opportunity: these are the six ordinary factors of human life, and they can all be tested to the full and examined to the last point without any of them, or even all of them together, accounting for Jesus Christ. [Fairbairn, *Philosophy of the Christian Religion*, pp. 311-312.] Everything in Him is at once perfectly natural and yet manifestly supernatural.

He is unique in the history of mankind. As the Bishop of Birmingham has well said - One man of a particular race and age cannot be the standard for all men, the Judge of all men, of all ages and races, the goal of human, moral development, unless he is something more than one man among many. Such a universal Manhood challenges inquiry. [Bishop Gore, *The Incarnation*, p. 25.] This inquiry Christianity invites all men to pursue. Jesus Christ cannot be ignored. Whenever human thought has endeavored to do this it has been found impossible.

Whenever human life now tries to do so the task is soon seen to be beyond it. He must be considered. He demands the attention of all true men. The supreme question today, as ever, is "What think ye of Christ?"

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