

BLANSHARD ON JESUS BEING THE ALL-KNOWING AND SINLESS GOD

[Context: God is all knowing and sinless so if Jesus is God then he should be able to know anything he wants and should be sinless]

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Can the attributes of Deity, when ascribed to Jesus, be dismissed, then, on inductive grounds? We shall see that they can. It is surprisingly easy to show that if any reasonable meaning is given to these attributes, the New Testament record itself excludes them all. On such inductive grounds one error would nullify the claim to completeness of knowledge. One clear bit of evidence that the agent was ever frustrated of his aim would reveal limitation of power. One unkind word, one loss of temper, one act of less than full justice, one instance of underrating or overrating any of the intrinsic goods of life, would be inconsistent with a claim to moral perfection. Now, however ungrateful the assignment, we can only report that the recorded life of Jesus does not pass these tests.

Consider the claim that has been made for Jesus to perfect knowledge. There are three principal forms in which a falling short of such knowledge might be evinced: ignorance, error, and inconsistency.

Is there any reason to believe that Jesus was free from the burden of ignorance? He could hardly have been thus free if he grew in knowledge, as it is recorded that he did (Luke 2:52), for such growth means ascent from one degree of knowledge to another, and degrees of knowledge are, from the other side, degrees of ignorance. Henry Parry Liddon, the eloquent Victorian Canon of St Paul's, argued 'that since the founder of Christianity, in divinely recorded utterances, alluded to the transformation of Lot's wife into a pillar of salt, to Noah's ark and the Flood, and to the sojourn of Jonah in the whale, the biblical account of these must be accepted as historical, or that Christianity must be given up altogether.' The acceptance of this as a true dilemma would ensure the abandonment of Christianity. However great a figure Jesus was, he was not infallible and not omniscient. Did he know, for example, what the modern biologist knows about the origin of species, or what the geologist knows about the formation of the earth, or what the psychologist knows about conflict and repression? There is no evidence that he did, and a strong presumption that he did not. He knew his Old Testament, with its account of the creation of the earth and the sun (in that incorrect order), of the creation of birds and reptiles (also in that incorrect order), of the creation of man from 'the dust of the ground' and of woman from the man's rib. He read these things in his Scripture, which he regarded as inspired, and presumably accepted them as others did. Diseases that a modern psychiatrist would probably diagnose as epilepsy or schizophrenia he took as demon possession, and believed that he cured them (which he possibly did) by casting the demons out (which he pretty certainly did not). To say that he was somehow in command of modern knowledge in these fields is not only without ground; it is to indict him for indifference to his own people; for if he knew what the modern mind knows without making any effort to impart it, he was deliberately keeping his people in darkness. Since there is no reason to impute to him such a desire, we can only believe that in these and many other fields he shared the ignorance of his time.

Did he commit errors of fact? The New Testament records that he did. There were errors as to the past, the present, and the future. As for the past, he accepted the content of the Pentateuch generally as written by Moses, whereas it was not, and ascribed to David the authorship of the 110th Psalm (Mark 12:36), which most modern critics agree could not have been David's. As for mistakes about what to him was the present, he mistook the character of Judas when he was selecting his disciples. As for the future, he told his disciples that they should not have gone over the cities of Israel before he returned to earth in judgement (Matt. 10:23); they went over the cities, but his promised return did not come. He predicted that those who were faithful to him would receive 'now in this time' a hundredfold in such things as houses and lands (Mark 10:30); they did not receive them. He seems indeed to have held important misconceptions about himself. Was he the Messiah expected by the Jews? His own opinion on this point apparently varied. He never called himself the Son of David, a common way of referring to the Messiah, and preferred to call himself 'the Son of Man', which was not so used; indeed in one passage he seems to disavow the Messiah-ship (Matt. 22:41-45). But in another he seems to accept it (Matt. 11:2 ff.). It is probable, as Erdmann argues, that his conviction of being the Messiah came to him gradually, in which case either the earlier or the later conviction must have been in error. And how are the final tragic words about having been forsaken to be interpreted? The only intelligible way to construe them is that he had expected some form of divine co-operation and that the expectation had not been realised.

The record, then, does not support a claim that he was free from errors of fact. What of consistency in his reported life and teaching? Here too theological zeal on his behalf has shot beyond the mark. We have noted several instances already in which his teaching, as recorded, was not coherent. There were the two doctrines about divorce, the universality of his mission combined with its confinement to the lost sheep of Israel, the exhortation to honour father and mother combined

with the refusal to let a disciple bury his father; the injunction to non-resistance combined with the violent clearing of the temple. One inconsistency that we have noted must be stressed again, since it comes so near to the heart of the ethical teaching. If there was anything central in that teaching, it was the stress on love and forgiveness. Yet in both his teaching and his practice Jesus seems to have departed from the ideal repeatedly and in perplexing fashion. 'Whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven' (Matt. 10:33). This sounds uncomfortably like the expression of a vengeful spirit. A different kind of vengeance, but one still strangely at variance with the central Christian teaching, is ascribed to God by Paul. He writes of certain persons who 'received not the love of the truth' that 'for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie' (2 Thess. 2:10–11). To the modern mind this seems more like cat-and-mouse morality than like love or even justice. Along with the injunction of love, the spirit of revenge played a part in early Christian teaching that is explicable only on the assumption that this teaching had imperfectly broken away from the semi-barbarism of the day. In the epistle to the Hebrews, it is taught that even repentance is impossible on the part of a Christian who has been baptised and slipped away (Heb. 6:4–6); he will presumably be damned in spite of all efforts to repent.

It may be suggested that though a vengeful spirit may have been displayed on occasion by Paul and some of the other early Christians, it was never approved or exhibited by Christ himself. This is not borne out by the recorded facts. Christ specifically ascribed acts of vengeance to God: 'Shall not God avenge his own elect...? I tell you that he will avenge them speedily' (Luke 18:7–8); and we have seen that he represented God as inflicting for certain sins a penalty of everlasting agony disproportionate to any finite offence. Furthermore, if his denunciation of the Pharisees as 'full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness', as 'serpents', 'offspring of vipers', and due for 'the damnation of hell' is expressive of love or forgiveness, it is difficult to see what resources of language are left to provide a vehicle for condemnation. It may be answered that he denounced the sin, but loved the sinner. But he seems in some cases to make the sinners blacker than the sins. 'So far as I can make out...', writes Professor Fite, 'the dark picture of the Pharisees presented in the Gospels, often in the words of Jesus himself, stands alone in the history of the sect, unconfirmed by other evidence'. In his parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man, condemned incidentally for no reported reason except his wealth, is denied, even in the flames, the means of wetting his mouth or of warning his brothers of what lay in store for them. Immediately after saying that the stone which the builders rejected would become the head of the corner, Jesus added: 'but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder' (Luke 20:18). He is widely believed to have preached and practised unflinching love. But toward certain classes of persons, most notably hypocrites, his attitude as expressed would be more accurately described as an intense and withering detestation.

There were other breaches of consistency. He declared: 'whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire' (Matt. 5:22), but on more than one occasion he used the forbidden phrase himself (Matt. 23:17; Luke 12:20; 24:25). He announced that he came not to destroy but to fulfil, and that not a jot or tittle of the law was to pass away; but he repeatedly set aside the law with the remark, 'it has been said... but I say unto you'. He promised that his yoke was easy and his burden light; he also warned that any man who would follow him must 'deny himself and take up his cross'. He blessed the peacemakers, and his birth was heralded, according to tradition, by the proclamation of peace on earth; but he also said that he came to bring not peace but a sword, and to set one member of a household against another.

The ease with which such inconsistencies, which are certainly not all verbal, can be found suggests that Jesus' mind belonged to a different mould from the mind of the West, with that interest in clearly reasoned positions which it inherited from the Greeks. This impression is strengthened when we study the replies he gave to the many who questioned him. Seldom is a quite straightforward answer given. Sometimes the question is evaded. Was it in accordance with the law of Moses to give tribute to Caesar? The answer, 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's' (Mark 12:17), was scarcely an answer at all, since the question was precisely whether such tribute was to be included among 'the things that are Caesar's'. The evasion here may, to be sure, have been a justified resort to political expediency. But it was not always so. The Sadducees, who disbelieved in personal immortality, asked him regarding a woman who had been married seven times, whose wife she should be 'in the resurrection' (Mark 12:18–27). The reply given, namely that 'when they shall rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels which are in heaven,' answers the question in a sense, but by suggesting a degree of impersonality and sexlessness in the next life that threatens the notion of personal survival itself. The Pharisees asked him when the kingdom of God would come. His reply was that 'the kingdom of God cometh not with observation', meaning apparently that whenever it did come it would not be outwardly observable. The evasion is not made easier to understand by the fact that on another occasion he frankly stated that he did not know when the kingdom would come (Mark 13:32), and also that men would 'see the Son of man coming in the clouds with great power and glory' (Mark 13:26; italics mine). The Pharisees asked him whether divorce was lawful. He replied, 'What... God hath joined together, let not man put asunder'. They pointed out that their lawgiver, Moses, had expressly permitted divorce, which was correct. He replied: 'Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives' (Matt. 19:3–8). The reply again is puzzling, both because there seems to be no ground for it in the relevant Mosaic account (Deut. 24), and because it is hard to see why, merely because men were hard-hearted, their hard-heartedness toward their wives should have been legitimised. Sometimes the evasive answer was given with impressive intellectual skill. Certain doubters, noting his confidence that his acts embodied the divine will, asked him by what authority he did these things. He replied that he would tell them if they would first answer a question of his own about the baptism of John: Was it from God

or from man? This was a dilemma on whose horns the questioners were neatly impaled, and they found themselves unable to give either answer. Whereupon Jesus said, 'Neither do I tell you by what authority I do these things' (Mark 11:33). His disciples seem to have complained to him on one occasion that they were short of bread, to which his response, as reported, was, 'Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, and of the leaven of Herod' (Mark 8:15). The disciples were puzzled as to the relevance of the remark. So is the modern reader.

Much that puzzles us would no doubt be cleared up if we knew the circumstances of the case and the motives of the questioners. Jesus possessed an extraordinary power of divining what these motives were, and of giving answers that were relevant not so much to the questions asked as to the state of mind of the inquirers. And in spite of the skill he sometimes displayed in intellectual thrust and parry, it was not this kind of activity in which his heart lay, or his power. He was a practical moralist who wanted to regenerate men's feelings about others and about the goods they lived by, and he instinctively adopted the language that would speak to their feelings, the language of parable and poetry. When challenged to formulate his ethical counsels exactly, or to state in express propositions what men were to believe and why, he was still inclined to fall back on metaphor and simile, so that we do not know, and presumably never shall, what precisely he meant by some of the cardinal terms of his teaching: 'the kingdom of God', 'the love of God', 'the fatherhood of God', 'the son of man', 'everlasting life', 'heaven', 'hell', 'peace'. The fathers of the church and Catholic theologians have developed an immense intellectual apparatus to explicate and relate these ideas, all based on the assumption that through the simple language of the sower and his seed, of lost sheep and prodigal sons, houses built on rock or sand, candles hid under bushels and lambs led out to slaughter there is peeping an elaborate and articulated cosmology, with the Trinity, the creation, the incarnation, the atonement, the salvation of the faithful, and the eternities of heaven and hell all taking their precisely defined and rationally appointed places. To anyone who tries to get rid of preconceptions and to read for himself the simple and beautiful language of the gospels, all this seems just the way in which the mind of Jesus did not work. He was not an 'intellectual'. A third-rate logician can point out inconsistencies, obscurities, errors, ambiguities, and fallacies almost without number in the record of his life and teaching. This does not show that he was not a great moralist or great man. It does show that the attempt to make of him an embodiment of omniscience does not correspond to fact.

Compared with this conviction that the power that governs all things cares, the prospect offered by rationalism is bleak. It admits that the world is governed by logic; it finds insufficient evidence that it is governed by love. The nature of things is not patterned to the heart's desire, though that desire has written itself large across every heaven that men have lived under. Religion and the philosophies animated by religion, holding that the heart has its reasons that reason does not know, have constructed a fabric in which the work of reason and that of feeling are intricately entangled with each other. We have seen already in our reflections on myth in religion how natural this entanglement is. We have also seen something of the long process by which an advancing reason has separated the strands of objective thought and anthropomorphic feeling. The understanding of how desire fashions belief was better understood after the explorations of Strauss and Feuerbach, of Freud and Frazer: and the shock of disillusionment was made more tolerable by the imaginative sympathy with which sceptics like Renan and Santayana could deal with the faith they had lost. The work of these men was iconoclastic, but in spite of defects of temper and insight it was in the main true.