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ANSWERING CHRIST'S CRITICS

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[EDITORS' NOTE: Unbelief & skepticism continue to expand their impact on society. Recent attacks on the person of Christ have come from *The Da Vinci Code* as well as the so-called "gospel of Judas." According to www.thebeast-movie.com, on June 6, 2006 (i.e., 6/6/6) a movie ridiculing the historicity of Christ (titled *The Beast*) is scheduled to be released in theatres worldwide. Likely many will ponder over questions that these sources raise regarding whether Jesus ever really lived, or if He did, whether He was a fraud. Others may simply choose to believe whatever they read, hear, or see. Regardless, Christians need to be prepared to give reasonable answers (cf. 1 Peter 3:15) when they are called upon to defend their faith in the Son of God. Twice in the past decade Apologetics Press has dealt extensively in *Reason and Revelation* with the historicity of Christ (see Jackson, 1998, 18[1]:6-7; Butt, 2000, 20[1]:1-6). This issue of *R&R* deals with questions critics of Christ often ask once they realize that His existence 2,000 years ago is indisputable. We hope that you benefit from learning how easily the allegations can be refuted.]

Once skeptics come to the realization that the evidence for the historicity of Christ and the historical accuracy of the New Testament cannot logically be explained away, the next step frequently taken by critics of Christ is to attack the Bible's own portrayal of Jesus. If the enemies of Christ can discredit His claims of divinity by demonstrating instances of deceitfulness and inappropriate behavior in His life, then Jesus certainly could not be Who He and the Bible writers claimed that He was—God in the flesh (John 1:1, 14). However, if the charges against Jesus' life and character are proven to be fallacious or unsubstantiated, then such accusations should be dismissed, and Jesus' true identity must either be accepted or rejected

based upon the fact that the Bible's portrayal of the life of Christ is consistent with His claims of deity.

So what have critics alleged about the Son of God? In an essay that appeared on evilbible.com, one enemy of Christ wrote: "Dear believer: ...I refuse to accept Jesus as my personal savior, for his behavior and teachings often expose one who should be escaped and not worshipped" (Schnook, n.d.). Atheist Dan Barker observed in an article titled "Why Jesus?": "It would be more reasonable and productive to emulate real, flesh-and-blood human beings who have contributed to humanity—mothers who have given birth, scientists who have alleviated suffering, social reformers who have fought injustice—than to worship a character of such dubious qualities as Jesus" (1993). Another critic of Christ has stated: "...Jesus taught few precepts that he himself did not violate! According to the Bible, JESUS WAS A HYPOCRITE and not really perfect after all! (Morgan, 1996, emp. in orig.). Allegedly, Jesus did and said many questionable things throughout His ministry that should cause one to flee from Him rather than follow Him. This article addresses several of those criticisms and provides reasonable responses in defense of the deity and unblemished disposition of Christ.

DID JESUS IGNORE THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT?

Like many critics of the life of Christ today, the first-century Pharisees certainly did not think that the Son of God was beyond reproach. Following Jesus' feeding of the four thousand, the Pharisees came "testing" Him, asking Him to

show them a sign from heaven (Matthew 16:1). Later in the book of Matthew (19:3ff.), the writer recorded how "the Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?'" It was their aim on this occasion, as on numerous other occasions, to entangle Jesus in His teachings by asking Him a potentially entrapping question—one that, if answered in a way that the Pharisees had anticipated, might bring upon Jesus the wrath of Herod Antipas (cf. Matthew 14:1-12; Mark 6:14-29) and/or some of His fellow Jews (e.g., the school of Hillel, or the school of Shammai). A third time the Pharisees sought to "entangle

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Him in His talk” (Matthew 22:15) as they asked, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” (22:17). The jealous and hypocritical Pharisees were so relentless in their efforts to destroy the Lord’s influence (as are many critics today), that on one occasion they even accused Jesus’ disciples of breaking the law as they “went through the grainfields on the Sabbath...were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat” (Matthew 12:1ff.). [NOTE: “Their knowledge of so trifling an incident shows how minutely they observed all his deeds” (Coffman, 1984, p. 165). The microscopic scrutiny under which Jesus lived likely was even more relentless than what some “stars” experience today. In one sense, the Pharisees could be considered the “paparazzi” of Jesus’ day.] Allegedly, “Jesus ignored the restrictions as to what can’t be done on the Sabbath” (McKinsey, 2000, p. 265). He supposedly allowed His disciples to “work” on this particular Sabbath, which the Law of Moses forbade (Matthew 12:2; cf. Exodus 20:9-10; 34:21).

Jesus responded to the criticism of His enemies by giving the truth of the matter, and at the same time revealing the Pharisees’ hypocrisy. As was somewhat customary for Jesus when being tested by His enemies (cf. Matthew 12:11-12; 15:3; 21:24-25; etc.), He responded to the Pharisees’ accusation with two questions. First, He asked: “Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat, nor

for those who were with him, but only for the priests?” (12:3-4). Jesus reminded the Pharisees of an event in the life of David (recorded in 1 Samuel 21:1ff.), where he and others, while fleeing from king Saul, ate of the showbread, which divine law restricted to the priests (Leviticus 24:5-9). Some have unjustifiably concluded that Jesus was implying innocence on the part of David (and that God’s laws are subservient to human needs—cf. Zerr, 1952, 5:41; Dummelow, 1937, p. 666), and thus He was defending His disciples “lawless” actions with the same reasoning. Actually, however, just the opposite is true. Jesus explicitly stated that what David did was wrong (“not lawful”—12:4), and that what His disciples did was right—they were “guiltless” (12:7). Furthermore, as J.W. McGarvey observed: “If Christians may violate law when its observance would involve hardship or suffering, then there is an end to suffering for the name of Christ, and an end even of self-denial” (1875, p. 104). The disciples were not permitted by Jesus to break the law on this occasion (or any other) just because it was inconvenient (cf. Matthew 5:17-19). The Pharisees simply were wrong in their accusations. Like many of Jesus’ enemies today, “The Pharisees were out to ‘get’ Jesus; and any charge was better than none” (Coffman, 1984, p. 165). The only “law” Jesus’ disciples broke was the pharisaical interpretation of the law (which was more sacred to some Pharisees than the law itself). In response to such hyper-legalism, Burton Coffman forcefully stated: “In the Pharisees’ view, the

disciples were guilty of threshing wheat! **Such pedantry, nit-picking, and magnification of trifles would also have made them guilty of irrigating land, if they had chanced to knock off a few drops of dew while passing through the fields!**” (p. 165, emp. added).

Jesus used the instruction of 1 Samuel 21 to cause the Pharisees to recognize their insincerity, and to exonerate His disciples. David, a man about whom the Jews ever boasted, blatantly violated God’s law by eating the showbread, and yet the Pharisees justified him. On the other hand, Jesus’ disciples merely plucked some grain on the Sabbath while walking through a field—an act that the law permitted—yet the Pharisees condemned them. Had the Pharisees not approved of David’s conduct, they could have responded by saying, “You judge yourself. You’re all sinners.” Their reaction to Jesus’ question—silence—was that of hypocrites who had been exposed.

Jesus then asked a second question, saying, “Have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless?” (Matthew 12:5). Here, Jesus wanted the Pharisees to acknowledge that even the law itself condoned **some** work on the Sabbath day. Although the Pharisees acted as if **all** work was banned on this day, it was actually the busiest day of the week for priests.

They baked and changed the showbread; they performed sabbatical sacrifices (Num. xxviii. 9), and two lambs were killed on the sabbath in addition to the daily sacrifice. This involved the killing, skinning, and cleaning of the animals, and the building of the fire to consume the sacrifice. They also trimmed the gold lamps, burned incense, and performed various other duties (McGarvey, n.d., pp. 211-212).

One of those “other duties” would have been to circumcise young baby boys when the child’s eighth day fell on a Sabbath (Leviticus 12:3; John 7:22-23). The purpose of Jesus citing these “profane” priestly works was to prove that the Sabbath prohibition was not unconditional. [NOTE: Jesus used the term “profane,” not because there was a real desecration of the temple by the priests as they worked, but “to express what was true according to the mistaken notions of the Pharisees as to manual works performed on the Sabbath” (Bullinger, 1898, p. 676).] The truth is, the Sabbath law “did not forbid work absolutely, but labor for worldly gain. Activity in the work of God was both allowed and commanded” (McGarvey, n.d., p. 212). Just as the priests who served

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God in the temple on the Sabbath were totally within the law, so likewise were Jesus' disciples as they served the "Lord of the Sabbath" (Matthew 12:8). Whose holiness was greater than that of the temple (12:6; cf. Coffman, p. 167). Jesus did not ignore nor encourage defiance of God's command to keep the Sabbath.

DID JESUS BREAK THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT?

Consider the mother who asks her son to do something for a neighbor, and the son responds to his mother by saying, "Woman, what does that have to do with me?" Responding to a mother's (or any woman's) request in twenty-first-century America with the refrain, "Woman....," sounds impolite and offensive. Furthermore, a Christian, who is commanded to honor his father and mother (Ephesians 6:2), would be out of line in most situations when using such an expression while talking directly to his mother.

In light of the ill-mannered use of the word "woman" in certain contexts today, some question how Jesus could have spoken to His mother 2,000 years ago using this term without breaking the commandment to "[h]onor your father and your mother" (Exodus 20:12; cf. Matthew 15:4; Matthew 5:17-20). When Jesus, His disciples, and His mother were at the wedding in Cana of Galilee where there was a depletion of wine, Mary said to Jesus, "They have no wine" (John 2:3). Jesus then responded to His mother, saying, "Woman, what does your concern have to do with Me? My hour has not yet come" (John 2:4). Notice what one skeptic has written regarding what Jesus said in this verse.

In Matt. 15:4 he [Jesus—EL] told people to "Honor thy father and thy mother"; yet, he was one of the first to ignore his own maxim by saying to his mother in John 4:24, "Woman, what have I to do with thee?" (McKinsey, 1995, p. 44).

Imagine someone talking to his own mother in such a disrespectful manner and addressing her by such an impersonal noun as 'woman.' Talk about an insolent offspring! (1995, p. 134).

Jesus needs to practice some parental respect... (McKinsey, 2000, p. 251).

Apparently Jesus' love escaped him (McKinsey, n.d., "Jesus...").

Why was Jesus disrespectful of his mother? In John 2:4, Jesus uses the same words with his mother that demons use when they meet Jesus. Surely the son of God knew that Mary had the blessing of the Father, didn't he, (and she was the mother of God—Ed.) not to mention the fact that the son of God would never

be rude? (McKinsey, n.d., "Problems....," parenthetical comment in orig.)

As one can see, Mr. McKinsey is adamant that Jesus erred. He uses such words to describe Jesus as disrespectful, insolent, unloving, and rude. Is he correct?

As with most of Christ's critics, Mr. McKinsey is guilty of judging Jesus' words by what is common in twenty-first-century English vernacular, rather than putting Jesus' comments in their proper first-century setting. It was not rude or inappropriate for a man in the first century to speak to a lady by saying, "Woman (*gunai*)...." This "was a highly respectful and affectionate mode of address" (Vincent, 1997), "with no idea of censure" (Robertson, 1932, 5:34). The New International Version correctly captures the meaning of this word in John 2:4: "Dear woman, why do you involve me?" (emp. added). Jesus used this word when complimenting the Syrophenician woman's great faith (Matthew 15:28), when affectionately addressing Mary Magdalene after His resurrection (John 20:15), and when speaking to His disconsolate mother one last time from the cross (John 19:26). Paul used this same word when addressing Christian women (1 Corinthians 7:16). As Adam Clarke noted: "[C]ertainly no kind of disrespect is intended, but, on the contrary, complaisance, affability, tenderness, and concern, and in this sense it is used in the best Greek writers" (1996).

As to why Jesus used the term "woman" (*gunai*) instead of "mother" (*metros*) when speaking to Mary (which even in first-century Hebrew and Greek cultures was an unusual way to address one's mother), Leon Morris noted that Jesus most likely was indicating

that there is a new relationship between them as he enters his public ministry.... Evidently Mary thought of the intimate relations of the home at Nazareth as persisting. But Jesus in his public ministry was not only or primarily the son of Mary, but "the Son of Man" who was to bring the realities of heaven to people on earth (1:51). A new relationship was established (1995, p. 159).

R.C.H. Lenski added: "[W]hile Mary will forever remain his [Jesus'—EL] mother, in his calling Jesus knows no mother or earthly relative, he is their Lord and Savior as well as of all men. The common earthly relation is swallowed up in the divine" (1961b, p. 189). It is logical to conclude that Jesus was simply "informing" His mother in a loving manner that as He began performing miracles for the purpose of proving His deity and the divine origin of His mes-

sage, His relationship to her was about to change.

Finally, the point also must be stressed that honoring fathers and mothers does not mean that a son or daughter never can correct his or her parents. Correction and honor are no more opposites than correction and love. One of the greatest ways parents disclose their love to their children is by correcting them when they make mistakes (Hebrews 12:6-9; Revelation 3:19). Similarly, one of the ways in which a mature son might honor his parents is by taking them aside when they have erred, and lovingly pointing out their mistake or oversight in a certain matter. Think how much more honorable this action would be than to take no action and allow them to continue in a path of error without informing them of such. We must keep in mind that even though Mary was a great woman "who found favor with God" (Luke 1:30), she was not perfect (cf. Romans 3:10, 23). She was not God, nor the "mother of God" (viz., she did not originate Jesus or bring Him into existence). But, she was the one chosen to carry the Son of God in her womb. Who better to correct any misunderstanding she may have had than this Son?

DID JESUS VIOLATE THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT BY ENCOURAGING THIEVERY?

Numerous passages of Scripture teach—either explicitly or implicitly—about the sinfulness of thievery. One of the Ten Commandments that God gave to Israel was: "You shall not steal" (Exodus 20:15). In the book of Leviticus, one can read where "the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to all the congregation of the children of Israel, and say to them... You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another.... You shall not cheat your neighbor, nor rob him'" (19:1-2, 11, 13). If a thief was found breaking into a house at night and was struck so that he died, the old law stated that there would be "no guilt for his bloodshed" (Exodus 22:2). Under the new covenant, the apostle Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus, saying, "Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need" (4:28). And to the Christians at Corinth, Paul wrote that thieves "will not inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). Thus, God obviously considers stealing to be a transgression of His law.

Critics of the deity of Christ, however, assert that Jesus once commanded His disciples to steal a donkey and a colt prior to entering Jerusalem during the final week of His life. According to Matthew's gospel account, Jesus instructed His disciples, saying, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Loose them and bring them to Me. And if anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord has need of them,' and immediately he will send them" (Matthew 21:1-3). Luke added: "So those who were sent went their way and found it just as He had said to them. But as they were loosing the colt, the owners of it said to them, 'Why are you loosing the colt?' And they said, 'The Lord has need of him.' Then they brought him to Jesus" (Luke 19:32-35). Regarding this story, McKinsey asked: "Are we to believe this isn't theft? Imagine seeing a stranger driving your car away while claiming the lord needed it" (1985, p. 1). Allegedly, "Jesus told people to take a colt...without the owners' permission." And that, says McKinsey, is "commonly known as stealing" (2000, p. 236). Another infidel by the name of Dan Barker commented on this event in the life of Jesus in his book, *Losing Faith in Faith*, saying, "I was taught as a child that when you take something without asking for it, that is stealing" (1992, p. 166). But did Jesus really encourage His disciples to steal a donkey and a colt? Can His actions be explained logically in light of the numerous statements throughout Scripture that clearly condemn thievery?

Before responding to these criticisms, consider the following: If a husband were to e-mail his wife and ask her to walk to a neighbor's house and pick up the neighbor's truck so that he could use it to haul an old furnace to the junkyard, would someone who read his e-mail (perhaps finding a hard copy of it crumpled up in the trash) be justified in concluding that this gentleman asked his wife to steal the truck? Certainly not. Since the e-mail had no other information in it than a request for the wife concerning a neighbor's truck, a person reading the note would have to have access to additional information in order to come to the conclusion that this man and his wife were guilty of theft. The reader may be ignorant of the fact that the husband had prearranged such a pick-up with his neighbor the previous day. Or, perhaps the neighbor had told the husband at some earlier time that he could use his truck whenever he needed it.

What Mr. McKinsey and other skeptics never seem to take into consider-

ation in their interpretation of Scripture is that the Bible does not record every single detail of every event it mentions (cf. John 21:25). The Bible was not intended to be an exhaustive chronological timeline citing every aspect about the lives of all of the men and women mentioned within it. The New Testament book of Acts covers a period of about thirty years, but it actually is only about **some** of the acts of **some** of the early Christians. There were many more things that Paul, Peter, Silas, Luke, and other first-century Christians did that are not recorded therein. For example, Paul spent three years in Arabia and Damascus after his conversion (Galatians 1:16-18), yet Luke did not mention this detail, nor the many things Paul accomplished during these three years.

The case of Jesus telling His disciples to go locate the donkey and colt does not prove thievery, any more than Jesus' disciples inquiring about and occupying an "upper room" makes them trespassers (cf. Mark 14:13-15). When sending His two disciples to get the requested animals, Jesus told them exactly where to go and what to say, as if He already knew the circumstances under which the donkey and colt were available. Jesus may very well have prearranged for the use of the donkeys. Neither Mr. McKinsey nor any other skeptic can prove otherwise. Similar to how a man is not obligated to go home from work every night and rehearse to his wife **everything** he did **each hour** at work, the Bible is not obligated to fill in every detail of every event, including the one regarding the attainment of two animals. **No contradiction or charge of wrong is legitimate if unrelated circumstantial details may be postulated that account for explicit information that is given.**

Furthermore, the innocence of Jesus and His disciples is reinforced by the fact that the disciples were able to leave with the beasts. Had the disciples really been stealing the animals, one would think that the owners would not have allowed such to happen. Also, nothing is said in the text about what happened to the animals after Jesus rode them into Jerusalem. For all we know, Jesus' disciples could have immediately taken them back to their owners.

Skeptics who accuse the Lord of thievery have no solid ground upon which to stand. Unless it can be proven that Jesus' disciples took the animals by force (and without prior permission), justice demands that the accusations of guilt must be withdrawn.

When Christ spoke to a group of hostile Jews in Jerusalem regarding God the Father, and His own equality with Him (John 5:17-30; cf. 10:30), He defended His deity by pointing to several witnesses, including John the Baptizer, the Father in heaven, and the Scriptures (5:33-47). One statement that has confused some Bible readers concerning Jesus' defense of His deity is found in John 5:31. Jesus began this part of His discourse by saying, "If I bear witness of Myself, **My witness is not true**" (emp. added). According to many Bible critics, this declaration blatantly contradicts the following statement He made on another occasion when speaking to the Pharisees. He said: "Even if I bear witness of Myself, **My witness is true**" (John 8:14, emp. added). How could He say that His witness was both true, and not true, without having lied?

Imagine for a moment an innocent man on trial for murder. He is judged to be guilty by the jury, even after proclaiming his innocence. (Someone had framed the defendant for the murder, and all the evidence the jury heard pointed to the defendant as the offender.) When leaving the court house, if the man who was wrongly convicted is asked by a reporter, "Are you guilty?," and he responds by saying, "If the court says I'm guilty, I'm guilty," has the man lied? Even though the statements, "I am guilty," and "I am not guilty," are totally different, they may not be contradictory, depending on the time and sense in which they are spoken. After the trial, the wrongly accused defendant simply repeated the jury's verdict. He said, "I am guilty," and meant, "The court has found me guilty."

When Jesus conceded to the Jews the fact that His witness was "not true," He was not confessing to being a liar. Rather, Jesus was reacting to a well-known law of His day. In Greek, Roman, and Jewish law, the testimony of a witness could not be received in his own case (Robertson, 1997). "Witness to anyone must always be borne by someone else" (Morris, 1995, p. 287). The Law of Moses stated: "One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established" (Deuteronomy 19:15; cf. Matthew 18:15-17). The Pharisees understood this law well, as is evident by their statement to Jesus: "You bear witness of Yourself; Your witness is not true" (John 8:13). In John 5:31, "Jesus points to the impossibility of anyone's being accepted on the basis of his own

word.... He is asserting that if of himself he were to bear witness to himself, that would make it untrue” in a court of law (Morris, p. 287). If Jesus had no evidence in a trial regarding His deity other than His own testimony about Himself, His testimony would be inconclusive and inadmissible. Jesus understood that His audience had a right to expect more evidence than just His word. Similar to the above illustration where an innocent man accepts the guilty verdict of the jury as final, Jesus said, “My witness is not true,” and meant that, **in accordance with the law**, His own testimony apart from other witnesses would be considered invalid (or insufficient to establish truth).

But why is it that Jesus said to the Pharisees at a later time that His “witness is true” (John 8:14)? The difference is that, in this instance, Jesus was stressing the fact that **His words** were true. Even if in a court of law two witnesses are required for a fact to be established (a law Jesus enunciated in verse 17), that law does not take away the fact that Jesus was telling the truth, just as it did not take away the fact that the wrongly accused man mentioned previously was telling the truth during his trial. Jesus declared His testimony to be true for the simple reason that His testimony revealed the true facts regarding Himself (Lenski, 1961b, p. 599). He then followed this pronouncement of truth with the fact that there was another witness—the Father in heaven Who sent Him to Earth (8:16-18). Thus, in actuality, His testimony was true in two senses: (1) it was true because it was indeed factual; and (2) it was valid because it was corroborated by a second unimpeachable witness—the Father.

God the Father (John 8:18; 5:37-38), along with John the Baptist (John 5:33), the miraculous signs of Jesus (5:36), the Scriptures (5:39), and specifically the writings of Moses (5:46), all authenticated the true statements Jesus made regarding His deity. Sadly, many of His listeners rejected the evidence then, just as people reject it today.

WAS JESUS IGNORANT OF ELIJAH'S ASCENSION?

When Jesus spoke to Nicodemus regarding the need to be “born again” (John 3:1-8), He also sought to impress upon the mind of this ruler of the Jews that His words were from above. Jesus spoke of spiritual things that no man knew (Matthew 13:35; cf. 7:28-29; Luke 2:47). One of the reasons Jesus gave for being able to expound on such spiritual

truths is found in John 3:13. Here, the apostle John recorded that Jesus said to Nicodemus, “No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man” (John 3:13). According to the skeptic, this statement by Jesus is severely flawed. Since the Old Testament reveals that Elijah escaped physical death and “went up by a whirlwind **into heaven**” (2 Kings 2:11; cf. Genesis 5:24; Hebrews 11:5), allegedly Jesus could not truthfully tell Nicodemus, “No one has ascended to heaven.” Is the skeptic right?

For Jesus’ statement to contradict what the Old Testament says about Elijah, one first must presuppose that Jesus was referring to the exact same place to which Elijah ascended. Can the skeptic be certain that the “heaven” to which Jesus referred, is the same one into which the body of Elijah ascended? The words “heaven” or “heavens” appear in our English Bibles about 700 times. And yet, in many of the passages where “heaven(s)” is found, the inspired writers were not discussing the spiritual heaven with which we most often associate the word. For example, in Genesis 1 and 2 the Hebrew word for heaven appears 15 times in 14 verses. Yet in every instance, the word is referring to something besides the spiritual heaven where God dwells. The word “heaven(s)” (Hebrew *shamayim*, Greek *ouranoi*) is used by Bible writers in three different ways. It is used to refer to the atmospheric heavens in which the airplanes fly, the birds soar, and the clouds gather (Genesis 1:20; Jeremiah 4:25; Matthew 6:26, ASV). “Heaven(s)” also is used in the Bible when referring to the firmament where we find the Sun, Moon, and stars—the sidereal heavens, or outer space (Genesis 1:14-15; Psalm 19:4,6; Isaiah 13:10). The third “heaven” frequently mentioned in Scripture is the spiritual heaven in which Jehovah dwells (Psalm 2:4; Hebrews 9:24), and where, one day, the faithful will live forevermore (Revelation 21:18-23; John 14:1-3). The context of John 3 clearly indicates that Jesus is referring to the spiritual heavens wherein God dwells (cf. John 3:27). The passage in 2 Kings 2:11, however, is not as clear. The writer of 2 Kings easily could have meant that the body of Elijah miraculously ascended up high into the air, never to be seen by anyone on Earth again. Nowhere does the text indicate that he left Earth at that moment to dwell in God’s presence. He definitely went somewhere, but we have no evidence that he was transferred to the actual throne room of God Almighty.

The Bible indicates that when God’s faithful servants leave this Earth, their spirits are taken to dwell in a place referred to as paradise (or “the bosom of Abraham”—Luke 16:19-31). Recall when Jesus was fastened to the cross, and told the penitent thief, “Today, you will be with Me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). The word paradise is of Persian derivation, and means a “garden” or “park.” Where was it that Jesus and the thief went? Neither of them went to heaven to be with God the Father on that very day for, in John 20:17 after His resurrection, Jesus reassured Mary that He had not yet ascended to the Father. So where did Jesus and the thief go after dying on the cross? Peter gave the answer to that question in his sermon in Acts 2 when he quoted Psalm 16. Acts 2:27 states that God would not abandon Christ’s soul in **hades**, nor allow Christ to undergo decay. So while Christ’s body was placed in a tomb for three days, Christ’s spirit went to **hades**. [NOTE: The word **hades** occurs ten times in the New Testament, and always refers to the unseen realm of the dead—the receptacle of disembodied spirits where all people who die await the Lord’s return and judgment. One part of **hades**, where Jesus and the thief went, is known as **paradise**.] Peter argued that David, who penned Psalm 16, was not referring to himself, since David’s body was still in the tomb (Acts 2:29), and his spirit was still in the **hadean** realm (Acts 2:34). Acts 2 indicates that a faithful servant of God does not go directly to be with God the Father when he dies; rather, he goes to a holding place in **hades** known as **paradise**—the same place where Abraham went after he died (Luke 16:22ff.), and the same place where the spirit of Elijah went after he was caught up from the Earth. In short, the Bible does not teach that Elijah left Earth to begin immediately dwelling in the presence of the Father (where Jesus was before His incarnation—John 1:1). Thus, technically he did not ascend to the “place” whence Jesus came.

For the sake of argument, consider for a moment that the skeptic is right, and that Elijah’s spirit did not go to paradise, but was taken to dwell in the very presence of God. Could Jesus still have made the statement He did, and yet not be inaccurate? We believe so. Notice again the response to Nicodemus’ question, “How can these things be?” Jesus said: “If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? **No one has ascended to heaven** but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man” (John 3:12-

13, emp. added). It may be that Jesus meant nothing more than that no one has ever gone up to heaven “by his own act” or “on his own terms” (see Bullinger, 1898, pp. 281-282). Elijah and Enoch had been **taken** by God, which is different than freely ascending up into heaven by one’s own ability. Furthermore, Jesus’ words, “No one has ascended to heaven,” also could have meant that no one has ever gone up into heaven to then return and speak firsthand about what he saw, and to spread the same saving message that Jesus preached. Jesus was emphasizing to Nicodemus how no one on Earth at that time was revealing such spiritual truths as Christ was, because no one ever had ascended to heaven only to return and talk about what he had seen and learned. Such seems to have been the main point Jesus was making in John 3:13. No one on Earth had seen what Jesus had seen, and thus none could teach what He taught.

Truly, the skeptic’s accusation that Jesus either lied or was mistaken regarding His comment to Nicodemus about no one having ascended to heaven is unsubstantiated. Perhaps the word heaven used in 2 Kings 2:11 was not meant to convey the idea of the spiritual heavens in which God dwells. Or, considering the Bible’s teaching on departed spirits of the righteous being in a holding place known as paradise, and not in the actual presence of Almighty God, Jesus could have meant that no person has ever ascended to the throne room of God from which He came. Furthermore, it also is interesting to note that Nicodemus, being “a man of the Pharisees” (John 3:1), and thus one who would have been very well ac-

quainted with the details of the Old Testament, did not respond to Jesus by saying, “Wait a minute, Rabbi. What about Elijah and Enoch? Isn’t it written in the law and prophets that they ascended to heaven?” Surely, had Jesus contradicted something in the law and the prophets, it would have been brought to His attention, especially by a Pharisee. Yet, the apostle John never recorded such a statement.

Admittedly, at first glance, it might appear as if the statements, “Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven” (2 Kings 2:11) and “No man has ascended to heaven” (John 3:13), are incongruous. However, when a person considers all of the possible solutions to the allegation that Jesus was ignorant of Elijah and Enoch’s ascensions, he must admit that such a conclusion is unjustified.

WAS JESUS A HYPOCRITE?

A man who instructs a person to refrain from doing something he deems inappropriate, but then proceeds to do the very thing he forbade the other person to do, is considered a hypocrite. A preacher who teaches about the sinfulness of drunkenness (cf. Galatians 5:21), but then is seen a short while later stumbling down the street, intoxicated with alcohol, could be accused of being guilty of hypocrisy. Some have accused Jesus of such insincere teaching. Allegedly, in the very sermon in which He condemned the Pharisees for their unrighteousness (Matthew 5:20), Jesus revealed His own sinfulness by way of condemning those who

used a word He sometimes uttered. Based upon His forbiddance of the use of the word “fool” in Matthew 5:22, and His use of this word elsewhere, skeptics have asserted that Jesus (Who the Bible claims “committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth”—1 Peter 2:22; cf. 2 Corinthians 5:21) was guilty of hypocrisy (see Morgan, 1996; Wells, 2001). In Matthew 5:21-22, Jesus stated:

You have heard that it was said to those of old, “You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.” But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, “Raca!” shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, “**You fool!**” shall be in danger of hell fire (Matthew 5:21-22, emp. added).

Whereas in this passage Jesus warned against the use of the word “fool,” in other passages Jesus openly used this term to describe various people. Near the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus likened the person who heard His teachings, but did not follow them, to “a **foolish man** who built his house on the sand” (Matthew 7:26, emp. added). When teaching about the need to be prepared for His second coming, Jesus compared those who were not ready for His return to **five foolish virgins** (Matthew 25:1-12). Then, while Jesus was condemning the Pharisees for their inconsistency in matters of religion, He stated: “Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obliged to perform it.’ **Fools and blind!** For which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold?” (Matthew 23:16-17; cf. 23:18-19, emp. added). The question that some ask in response to these alleged hypocritical statements is, “How could Jesus condemn the use of the word ‘fool’ in Matthew 5:22, but then proceed to use this word Himself on other occasions?”

First, for Jesus’ statement in Matthew 5:22 to contradict His actions recorded in other passages, the skeptic must prove that the term “fool,” as used in 5:22, is the same word used elsewhere. The Greek word “Raca,” used earlier in Matthew 5:22, is a transliteration of the Aramaic term whose precise meaning is disputed. [Most likely, it means “an empty one who acts as a numskull” (Lenski, 1961a, p. 219; cf. also Robertson, 1930, 1:44).] The exact meaning of the term “fool” (Greek more) in this context also is debated. “Most scholars take it, as the ancient Syrian versions did, to mean you fool” (Bauer, et al.,

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1957, p. 533, emp. in orig.). Although some assume that more is the vocative of the Greek *moros*, in all likelihood,

just as “Raca” is a non-Greek word, so is the word *more* that Jesus used here. If so, then it is a word which to a Jewish ear meant “rebel (against God)” or “apostate”; it was the word which Moses in exasperation used to the disaffected Israelites in the wilderness of Zin... (Numbers 20:10). For these rash words, uttered under intense provocation, Moses was excluded from the Promised Land (Kaiser, et al., 1996, p. 359).

Thus, it is quite possible that *more* (translated “[Y]ou fool” in Matthew 5:22) is not the normal Greek *moros* (fool) that Jesus applied to the Pharisees on other occasions (Matthew 23:17,19), but represents the Hebrew *moreh* (cf. Numbers 20:10). [For this reason, translators of the American Standard Version added a marginal note to this word in Matthew 5:22: “Or, *Moreh*, a Hebrew expression of condemnation.”] Obviously, if two different words are under consideration, Jesus logically could not be considered a hypocrite.

Second, it must be remembered that Jesus’ comments in Matthew 5:22 were made within a context where He was condemning unrighteous anger (5:21-26). Whereas the Pharisees condemned murder, but overlooked the evil emotions and attitudes that sometimes led to the shedding of innocent blood, Jesus condemned both the actions and the thoughts. Instead of dealing with only “peripheral” problems, Jesus went to the heart of the matter. As someone Who “knew what was in man” (John 2:25), Jesus was more than qualified to pronounce judgment upon the hypocritical Pharisees (cf. John 12:48). Like the unrighteousness that characterized the Pharisees’ charitable deeds (Matthew 6:1-4), prayers (6:5-15), fasting (6:16-18), and judgments (7:1-5), Jesus also condemned their unrighteous anger. [NOTE: Jesus did not condemn all anger (cf. Ephesians 4:26; John 2:13-17), only unrighteous anger.] It was in this context that Jesus warned against the use of the word “fool.” Jesus was not prohibiting a person from calling people “fools” if it was done in an appropriate manner (cf. Psalm 14:1), but He was forbidding it when done in the spirit of malicious contempt. He “warned against using the word fool as a form of abuse” that indicated “hatred in one’s heart toward others” (“Fool,” 1986; cf. Matthew 5:43-48). As in many other situations, it seems that the attitude, rather than actual words, is the focus of the prohibition.

While this verse, when taken in its context, is seen to be consistent with Jesus’ words and actions recorded elsewhere in the gospel accounts, His prohibition regarding the **manner** of a word’s usage should not be overlooked in the apologist’s effort to defend the deity of Christ (or any other Bible doctrine). We may call an atheist a “fool” for not acknowledging God’s existence (Psalm 14:1), but to do so in a hateful, malicious manner is sinful. Remember, the Christian is called to “give a defense to everyone” in a spirit of “meekness and fear” (1 Peter 3:15).

CONCLUSION

Although critics of Christ were numerous during the time in which He lived and shortly thereafter, many peoples and nations since that time have either considered Him, at worst, a “sublime person” (cf. Renan, n.d.) and great moral teacher, or, at best, the Son of God. But times have changed. Unfortunately, the world in which we live (even nations founded upon Christian principles, i.e., the United States of America) is becoming less and less tolerant of the personality and teachings of Christ.

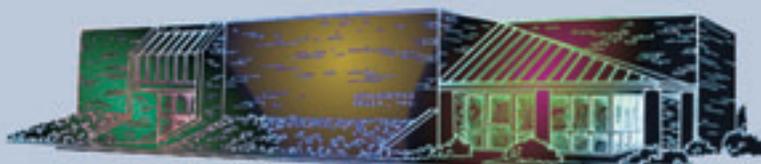
With increasing frequency, Jesus’ enemies are casting caustic criticisms at our Lord and His church. Books, journals, Web sites, movies, etc. are being produced at record speed that attempt to undermine the very foundation of Christianity—the fact that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). With this in mind, Christians must prepare themselves for the defense of Christ’s historicity, deity, and spiritual purity. Nothing is more essential to the Christian’s faith than Christ. What then could be more important for Christians to do than to defend Who He really was—the Son of God?

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NOTE FROM THE EDITOR



“THE TRUTH ABOUT’ TRACTS”



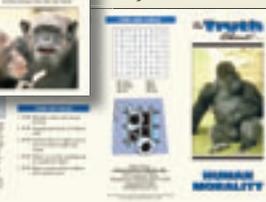
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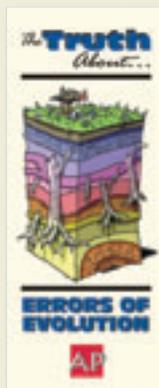
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