

## "My Father is greater than I." - Jesus. (John 14:28)

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### *The problem*

We Christians are generally taught that Jesus is equal to the Father. This verse calls that into question (or some would say, appears to call that into question). There is a ready answer, both traditional and common—the road more traveled, if you will: That Jesus spoke this according to his human nature alone. Of course humanity is less than deity; problem solved.

This whole piece will assume the reader is familiar with basic Christian theology and, considering where it will be read, that the reader is probably fairly orthodox according to historical Christian views.

### *The problem with the answer*

The answer—that Jesus spoke according to only his human nature—has seemed problematic to me. For one, we had to flirt with the outskirts of Nestorian theology to say that; it essentially separates the divine and human in Christ by saying that the divine did not participate at all in that answer. If Christ's humanity and divinity are separate in such a way that he said things according to just the human nature alone, then how do we recognize things where the divine was participating? What else did he teach only according to his human nature? Did he die only according to his human nature? Was he baptized only according to his human nature? Did he weep at Lazarus' tomb only according to his human nature? Did the very nature of God participate with manhood fully, or not?

The answer that Jesus spoke according to only his human nature may also be problematic in light of what Jesus said, "I do nothing of myself; but as my Father has taught me, I speak of these things" (John 8:28). Sure, there are different ways we could understand this depending on how we view Jesus. But it

does lend more weight to the idea that, if we take the gospels as reasonably reliable witnesses, we have reason to wonder whether "only according to the human nature" is really consistent with what Jesus' contemporaries wrote about him and what they meant to tell us about him.

Many people are decidedly uncomfortable with Jesus saying "My Father is greater than I" because it shines a spotlight on a problem-area for understanding the Trinity. I have heard theologians wrestle with questions like "Why is the Father the *first* person of the Trinity, if all are equal?" Or, "Why was the *second* person of the Trinity the one who was incarnate? Could it have been another?" I suppose, from that point of view, you could just as easily ask how the *third* person was assigned the job of being the one who came at Pentecost. If our starting point is "There are three equal persons who are one God", then those questions are very difficult to answer at all, much less to answer convincingly. They are not so difficult to answer if our starting point is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—the way the people encounter God, rather than the theories attempting to explain it.

### *The road less traveled and the nature of the Father*

And so I am, for this piece, taking the road less traveled. I'm not talking about the easy solution that many non-Trinitarians have taken, where they likewise assume that Jesus was talking according to his human nature—and this because they assume the human nature is the only nature he had. It is often assumed that if only we dismiss the Gospel of John, the problem goes away and we get a human Jesus.\* Some have pointed out that it's only in the Gospel of John that Jesus claims to be equal with God, only in the Gospel of John that Jesus says that whoever has seen Jesus has seen the Father, only there that he is called uniquely begotten of God. But it is also only in the Gospel of John that Jesus makes problematic statements such as "the Father is greater than I", or the Father being "the only true God" (John 17:3). So

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\* If we dismiss the Gospel of John and just limit ourselves to the other writings about Jesus, we still don't get a merely human Jesus. But that's beyond the scope of discussing "My Father is greater than I" and what to make of it for talking about the Trinity.

rather than toss out John, I think we might want to consider the possibility that our interpretation isn't a great fit to what John has said.

Here I start by taking a broad application of Jesus' saying, "I do nothing of myself; but as my Father has taught me, I speak of these things." What if we apply that also to "The Father is greater than I"? Taking a close look at the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we can notice one thing: only the Father is without origin. The Son is "begotten" of the Father; the Spirit "proceeds". The Father is the origin of the Son and the Spirit. The difference between the Son and the Spirit on the one hand, and creation on the other hand, is that the Son and the Spirit are not creations. They are of the very essence of God. But that very essence has its origins in the Father. The Father is unique within the Trinity in being the only "person"—if we care to use that language—absolutely without origin, absolutely self-existing. That is why, when we use Trinitarian language to describe God, that the Father must be the first person of the Trinity.

Some could say—and fairly enough—that the persons of the Trinity are numbered as "first, second, and third" after how they are listed in the ancient baptismal formula: "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." True enough; but unless that baptismal formula is arbitrary then the order there may give us knowledge to help us in our understanding of God. And when we study further, we find that not only is the Father listed first in the baptismal order, but that he is also the origin of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The baptismal formula fits well with what we know of the Father from other teachings of Jesus.

### *The road less traveled and the nature of the Son*

Once, when reading Jurgen Moltmann's writings, I came across a passage where I badly wanted to check the translation and see if he really could have said such a thing; he said, in essence, that the second person of the Trinity *became* the Word of God. I suspect the translation was accurate about the general intent, because several of the things he had said sounded as though his starting point was the

idea of three persons in one Godhead, rather than the witness of those who had seen remarkable events involving the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He sounded as though he was denying that the Son is intrinsically the Word of God. And whenever we talk primarily about "persons of the Trinity", we risk losing sight of that. But what if it is better to start with what Jesus' contemporaries said about him, rather than what later theologians and philosophers made of it? Here we do not find "the second person became the Word", but "The Word became flesh."

When the Gospel of John tries to describe to us who Jesus is, it starts with the creation of the world, how God spoke the Word and shaped the world. From there, having introduced the Word as the active power of God behind the very existence of this world, the author moves on to say that this Word became flesh; that is the Gospel of John's introduction of Jesus. I don't really think the view that "Jesus only had a human nature" is truly on the table from the Gospel of John's standpoint. The Word of God—being the living word of the living God—fittingly came to us as a person rather than a book. But the Word of God is sent from God, derived from God, spoken by God—shows God, reflects God, reveals God. We can truly and fully affirm that whoever sees Jesus sees the Father. And yet the Father is greater, not by having things that were withheld (as if all the fullness of God did not reside in his Word), nor by staying transcendent while Jesus walks the earth. The Father is greater as the one who sends, the one who is the origin. Jesus did nothing apart from his Father's will; it was not the other way around. The Word of God reflects the Father whose Word he is; the Son of God is in every way a true image. We can affirm that he is the way, the truth, and the life, that no one comes to the Father except through him; and yet, we still see that he is here as the way to the Father who sent him.

### *The road less traveled and the nature of Holy Spirit?*

No, the text I'm discussing—"The Father is greater than I"—is not the right place to discuss the Holy Spirit. So here I will limit myself to just a few comments. The Holy Spirit, likewise, is the Spirit of God. Just as Jesus is the Word of God, is fully of God, is uncreated, likewise the Holy Spirit is fully of God

and is uncreated. And yet both have their origins in God the Father. (Many would here add, "and the Son"; this writing is not the time or place for that argument.)

### *The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit*

Christians have called on the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit from ancient times. The baptismal formula has always been one of the important texts informing our understanding of God. I think it is no accident that the place we look to understand God is the place where we first meet him as Christians: at the baptismal font. The texts about baptism speak of our rescue, our being remade in the image of God, our cleansing and rebirth, the renewal of creation, and the forgiveness of sins. At each step of the baptismal formula, God moves closer to us: from "our Father in heaven" to the Son who is God With Us to the Spirit who is God within us, making us God's own temples. We are caught up into the life of God himself, transformed by the renewing of our minds. That is the promise of the power of God at work in this world.

### *Two roads diverged*

"My Father is greater than I." If Jesus spoke this according to the fullness of who he is as Christ, if he spoke as the Word of God, then he has taught us something about God. He has forced us to look more closely not at the abstract "three persons of the Trinity", but at what it means for God to act in this world as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and how the Word of God and the Spirit of God are related to what it means to be God, and to be the people of God. When we understand God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we understand a God who acts in this world for us and for our salvation. So this saying does challenge our understanding of the Trinity, after its own way.

When we speak of the three persons of the Trinity, do we have as clear a picture of God as when we speak of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit?