

ADVERTISING THE TRUTH

A Biblical Response to Blasphemous Billboards

(All scripture quotations are taken from the ESV)

A group called “World’s Last Chance” (hereafter, WLC) has purchased a good deal of billboard space in several counties in southwest Virginia. They have expended quite a bit of money on this endeavor. What is their message? Everything you believe about God is wrong. *Christians hold that God is one God in three persons. He is triune: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who are the same in substance and equal in power and glory.* Not so, say the people behind the billboards.

The first gauntlet they threw down against orthodox Christian belief centers on the question of the Triunity of God. Here is the message posted on their first billboard: “Are you committing idolatry? Scripture says God is one not three in one.” They claim that Scripture not only does not teach that God is Triune; it positively denies it. Then they launched a further assault on Christian belief with a second billboard. This one said, “Jesus is not God. Scripture says Jesus did not pre-exist in heaven.” Let’s put these two points together. First, the doctrine of the Trinity is a false teaching. If someone holds this belief, then the second point naturally follows. Jesus is not a divine being in the same sense that the Father is a divine being (let alone the Holy Spirit). Both claims are provocative, but are they true?

Before answering this question, let it first be said that this claim is not a new one. As provocative as it may sound, this is an ancient heresy. In the early fourth century, a presbyter named Arius in Alexandria, Egypt is purported to have made similar claims. Arianism is the school of thought that arose around him and it claimed that Jesus was not God in the same sense that the Father was God. Arians would say that Jesus is divine, but He is divine in a different sense, being of a different substance than the Father. He is the highest of creatures, but He is still a creature. Like all other animals, human beings, and angels, the Father created Him. In terms of creatures, He holds a status beyond that of all the others, but he is a creature nonetheless. In short, though He is a divine being, He is not a divine being in the same way and in the same sense that the Father is a divine being.

The people behind the billboards are offering nothing new; they are simply parroting this ancient heresy that has been answered many times over. They have joined the ranks of such cults as the so-called Jehovah’s Witnesses (who are in fact no true witnesses of Jehovah) and the Mormons who have exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator (Rom 1:25).

Let's return to the question at hand: are the claims of the WLC billboards true? Let me say at the outset that **their claims are false**. They are not false simply because the universal witness of orthodox Christian belief testifies against them (though this is significant of itself); **they are false because their claims run counter to the teaching of Scripture**. Others have already helpfully made note of the biblical warrant for holding to both the triunity of God (that God is One God in Three persons) and the full co-equality of the Son with the Father, so I will not rehearse what they have said here. However, the following will suffice to show that WLC and others like them are wrong on both points. I will be leaving aside much of the technical discussion of the Greek for ease of reading and for considerations of length.

Philippians 2:1-11 is one of the most clear and penetrating passages in Scripture that demonstrates both the full deity of the Lord Jesus Christ and plurality in the Godhead. Let us look first at what Paul says about the full deity of Christ in this passage before we move on to consider the question of plurality in the Godhead.

Following the logic of Paul's thought, we see immediately that two claims that WLC's billboard made are manifestly false. They say that Scripture says "Jesus is not God" and that "Jesus did not pre-exist in heaven," but this is precisely the opposite of what Paul says. The Apostle says that Jesus *is* divine in the same way that God is divine (here, reference to God is evidently reference to the Father). This is the force of the phrase "being in the form of God," but you will notice the connection between this phrase and what follows. Jesus did not regard His equality with God, His "being in the form of God," as a status or condition to be used for His own advantage. In other words, Paul clearly recognizes an equality between God and Jesus at the level of 'being.' To put this differently, whatever God is, that is what Jesus is. This is paralleled in verses 7-8. When the eternal Son took upon Himself the form of a man and became a servant, he was human in every way that any other human would be. In other words, whatever a man is, that is what Jesus is.

This alone would prove that Jesus did 'pre-exist in heaven,' but Paul makes the point explicit. Before he became man and took upon Himself the form of a servant (verses 7-8), he emptied Himself. While the time stamp is not stated explicitly, it is evident that Jesus had to exist before His incarnation, and from other passages of Scripture that He had to exist before the whole of creation (John 1:1; Col 1:15-17). As we proceed through Phil 2, Paul continues to drive home the point that Jesus is fully divine in the same sense that God the Father is divine. In verses 9-11, Paul makes two claims to demonstrate this.

First, God the Father has highly exalted Jesus and given Him a name that is above all names. What is this name? The name is not Jesus, but Lord. Any student of the Old Testament will know that the title “Lord” is often used in relation to God, and here the title is applied to Jesus. It is fitting that the one who is equal to the Father, who emptied Himself by becoming a man and dying the death of a criminal, would then be returned to the high station he possessed before His incarnation. This is a fulfillment of Jesus’ prayer in John 17:5: *“And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.”* While Jesus’ glory was veiled in large measure throughout the course of His earthly ministry, His glory is now revealed in its fulness as He takes His rightful place at the right hand of the Father. The language of the Father exalting the Son in Phil 2:9-11 is nothing less than a statement of the Son’s return to the glory of the Father, a glory with which He is identified by the use of the name Lord. This point is strengthened with Paul’s second claim.

Paul says that the purpose of this exaltation is that ‘every knee would bow’ and ‘every tongue confess’ that Jesus Christ ‘is Lord.’ Every human being will come to recognize the essential deity of Jesus Christ. Paul draws a direct connection between Jesus and YHWH (pronounced Yahweh) in this passage by quoting from Isa 45:22-25. YHWH is speaking in Isaiah 45, and He says this: *“I am God and there is no other. By myself I have sworn; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return: ‘To me every knee shall bow every tongue shall swear allegiance.’”* You will not find a stronger claim of monotheism in the entirety of the Old Testament than you find in Isa 45:22-25, and Paul says that the fulfillment of this passage is found in the Lord Jesus Christ. Here Paul accords Jesus a rank and status that is identical to God the Father. Paul affirms the full deity of the Son, that the Son is divine in every way that the Father is divine.

At the same time, Paul’s claim asserts plurality in the Godhead. He distinguishes between Jesus Christ the Lord, and God the Father. There is only one God, as per Isa 45:22-25 and Deut 6:4, but in this one God is mysteriously a plurality of persons. While the Holy Spirit is not mentioned here, He too is part of the identity of the one God. I don’t have space to develop this point here, but note that the Spirit is the one who comes from the Father and the Son (John 14:25-26) and who directs the early church in its missionary endeavors (Acts 13:2). **I intend to develop these points further in two sermons to be preached on August 24th (on the Trinity) and August 31st (on the deity of Christ).**

The confession that Jesus Christ is Lord is a confession that redounds to the glory of the eternal Father (Phil 2:11). Refusing to recognize that Jesus is both man and God is not simply a theological mistake, it is blasphemy (1 John 4:2-3). There is a reason why the early

church roundly condemned this as heresy, because it is a departure from the biblical teaching on the person and work of Christ and on the nature of God Himself. Only God can save His people from their sins.

We should pray that the Lord would grant repentance to those who have put up these billboards. We should pray that God would use the presence of these billboards to strengthen His people's understanding of His triune nature. We should pray that though the evil one certainly means this for evil, God can turn it to good.

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