

Critical Issues Commentary

A monthly commentary on Biblical concerns that impact you

Little “gods”?

written by Bob DeWaay

A few weeks ago as I was driving to the church in the morning I turned on one of our local Christian radio stations. A popular faith teacher was proclaiming that God created Adam to be the “god of this world.” He said that when Adam committed “high treason,” he turned his authority over to Satan, who then became the god of this world. Satan, according to the teacher, continued in that role until Jesus, the second Adam, came and defeated him and took back the authority over the earth.

The radio preacher went on to teach that once Jesus had wrestled godhood over the earth away from Satan, Jesus ascended to heaven, giving the church His authority over the earth. The problem is that Christians are sometimes ignorant of our authority (to be like Adam, gods over the earth) and thus give Satan opportunity to rob us of our rights. The implication is that we are “gods” but do not know it.

These teachings are popular, therefore there is a critical need to educate the body of Christ about the matter of godhood. How many Gods are there? I asked that question in a sermon some years ago and the four year old son of one of our elders shouted “**one!**” Jesus said, “I praise Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that Thou didst hide these things from the wise and intelligent and didst reveal them to babes” (**Matthew 11:25**). Sophisticated and eloquent preachers now reject that which should be basic to the beliefs of all Christians. There is but one God.

This month we will examine the Scripture carefully to see if there are such things as “gods,” and if so, who they are. Next, to assess properly the popular teaching outlined above, we also will study the deity of Christ and

His uniqueness. There are important differences between Christ and us. Finally, the Great Commission as taught in Matthew 28 will be studied to learn just what authority our Lord has given us.

The Biblical Doctrine of God

To understand clearly why a man cannot become a god, we must understand some things about the nature of God. Our finiteness limits what we can know about the infinite God. Nevertheless, Scripture reveals and history displays true, understandable, and unchangeable facts about God. We can know the truth because God has chosen to reveal Himself to us limited, mortal creatures.

For centuries until this day, the Jews have repeated what is called the “shema” (which means “hear, listen, obey”). It is **Deuteronomy 6:4**, “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!” The creeds of the historical church reaffirm the truth that there is one God. See the appendix at the end of this article for the Nicene Creed.

Christianity and Judaism agree that there is only one God (this is called “monotheism”). That Christianity understands that the one God of the Bible eternally exists in three persons (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) is a further clarification of God's nature but not a rejection of monotheism.

Any definition of God must include His essential attributes. That He eternally exists in all of His attributes is foundational to the Judeo-Christian doctrine of God. He is holy, loving, just, true, all-powerful, all-knowing, omnipresent, and possessing every other conceivable good quality. This is what God is, not that to which He attained. Created beings can be given a measure of some of these attributes,

but they depend on God for them. That means that we received whatever we have (see **1Corinthians 4:7**) and owe our very existence to God. We depend on our Creator for “every good and perfect gift” and forever remain **created**. A created being can never become God. Having been created disqualifies him. This means that Adam was not a god, and that Satan was not really a god.

Who Are the “gods”?

Nevertheless, in 2Corinthians 4:4 Satan is called “the god of this world [lit. `age].” If only the true God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) is really God, then what is a “god”? **Exodus 20:3** says, “You shall have no other gods before Me.” If there is only one God, how can there be “other gods”? The next verse answers the question, “You shall not make for yourself an idol...” A god is a created something or someone that is worshipped as if it were God. “gods,” with a small **g**, are idols! Satan is the “god of this age” because he is worshipped (although unwittingly by some) as such, not because he has the essential attributes of godhood. Also consider that Paul called Satan this after the cross. If the theory that Satan was god over the earth for a limited time until Jesus took this role away from him were true, then by the time Paul wrote to the Corinthians, this would no longer have been the case.

1Corinthians 8:4-6 clarifies this: “Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him.” All things, including the so-called “gods,” come ultimately from God says Paul. Evil

does not have eternal existence in its own right, but is a perversion of what God originally created as good. This clear passage in 1Corinthians proves that ultimately there are no other gods, only created beings called “gods” or foolishly worshiped as such. The “gods” are impostors whose masquerade will be exposed at the final judgment.

The true God is the **Creator**, idols are **created**. The Bible uses this distinction to separate the true God from all impostors. God told Jeremiah, “Thus you shall say to them, ‘The gods that did not make the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and from under the heavens’” (**Jeremiah 10:11**). Idols (“gods”) are created and perishable. God is the eternal Creator, and cannot perish. For us not to perish with the rest of the idols, we must receive forgiveness and eternal life from our Lord and God, Jesus Christ.

Since the true God is eternal and not created, Adam could not have been a “god” in any positive sense. Created gods are idols, and idolatry is forbidden by God. Therefore, God did not create Adam to be a “god” as the radio preacher asserted. The attempted deification of man began with the fall, thus so-called “gods” came into being. In introducing the idea of man aspiring to godhood, Satan lied and said, “You shall be like God.” He conceived this idea and tried to implement it himself (see **Isaiah 14:12-15**). To teach that God intended us to be “gods” over the earth is a horrible perversion of the truth. It is the very doctrine of Satan.

“No,” they say, “Jesus Himself taught that we are gods in **John 10:34**, therefore it is not wrong to teach this.” Let us examine this passage in its context to see if this interpretation is correct. Jesus quoted **Psalm 82:6** in His response to the Jewish leaders who had accused Him of blasphemy. Later at His trial before Pilate, the chief priests pressed this charge in their demand for His crucifixion (**John 19:7**). **Leviticus 24:16** stipulated that those who blasphemed the name of the Lord should be put to death. Since Jesus made claims

of deity, they reasoned, He had broken this law. This, however, was only true if indeed His claims were false. When the incident in John 19 happened, the time for the Father's purpose to be fulfilled had come, so Jesus did not answer this charge before Pilate (**John 19:9**). However, in John 10 the Jews were ready to stone Him. This was not the time for His death, nor was it the means that God in His eternal purpose had chosen for His innocent, only-begotten Son to die.

“The ‘gods’ are impostors whose masquerade will be exposed at the final judgment.”

Therefore Jesus debates with them and defends Himself against their accusation of blasphemy. Here is the account in John 10:

The Jews answered Him, “For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy; and because You, being a man, make Yourself out to be God.” Jesus answered them, “Has it not been written in your Law, ‘I said, you are gods’? If he called them gods, to whom the word of God came (and the Scripture cannot be broken), do you say of Him, whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, ‘You are blaspheming,’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God’?” (**John 10:33-36**)

They say that they want to stone Him not for what He had done, but what He had said. He had said, “I and the Father are one” (verse 30). Jesus used a brilliant debate tactic and logic to refute their reasoning. He quoted Psalm 82 in which God called the unrighteous judges of Israel “gods.” Before we jump to a hasty conclusion and think that these judges were in actuality deities, we should read the context. “They do not know nor do they understand; They walk about in darkness; All the foundations of the earth are shaken. I said, ‘You are gods, And all of you are sons of the Most High. Nevertheless you will die like men, And fall like any one of the princes.’

Arise, O God, judge the earth! For it is Thou who dost possess all the nations” (**Psalm 82:5-8**) Some deities! - lacking understanding and walking in darkness. The real judge is God Himself who knows all things, even the secrets of men's hearts. This was a rebuke to fallen human beings who were not doing the job God gave them.

There is only one God and the Scripture says He possesses all the nations. This was already true in the Old Testament. This passage contradicts the theory that Satan was god over the earth in some authoritative sense. The irony is that those called (remember the “so-called gods” in 1Corinthians 8) “gods” were to die like men. This proves that they are not really gods at all. Men are not gods. God's use of the term to describe these judges in no way implies that they had the essential attributes of deity.

William Hendriksen comments on the differences between the Old Testament judges who were called “gods” and Jesus Christ:

- The word of God (in written form) *had come to* the judges, but Jesus *is* himself, in very person, the Word of God... !
- The judges were born, just like other men, but Jesus *was sent into the world*...
- The judges were sons of God in a general sense only, Jesus is God's only-begotten... (emphasis his).¹

Jesus refers to this Psalm, using irony to show the error of His accusers. His logic was, if God called fallen, mortal men “gods,” then Jesus who Himself is the eternal Creator is not blaspheming by accurately referring to Himself as such. The word of God came to the Old Testament judges, Jesus **is** the Incarnate Word. If the lesser were not stoned for being called gods, the Greater One should not be. How ironic that they should accuse the only man who ever could legitimately call Himself “God” of blasphemy for doing so. **John 10:34** in no way authorizes us to claim godhood. Saying that men are gods was not the custom for the Jews.

There are a couple of New Testament passages where men were called

gods. **Acts 12:21** tells of Herod being called such, "And on an appointed day Herod, having put on his royal apparel, took his seat on the rostrum and began delivering an address to them. And the people kept crying out, 'The voice of a god and not of a man!' And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died." This gives little comfort to those who teach the "little gods" doctrine. There seems to be a pattern: those who claim to be gods die, proving that they are not. Jesus claimed deity and died, but His resurrection on the third day (which He had predicted) vindicated His claim. The rest will remain in the grave until Jesus comes again and both the righteous and unrighteous are raised to a resurrection of either life or judgement (**John 5:28,29**).

In another incident, Paul and Barnabas were called "gods":

And when the multitudes saw what Paul had done, they raised their voice, saying in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have become like men and have come down to us." And they began calling Barnabas, Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. And the priest of Zeus... brought oxen and garlands to the gates, and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. But when the apostles, Barnabas and Paul, heard of it, they tore their robes and rushed out into the crowd, crying out and saying, "Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you in order that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth...." (**Acts 14:11-15**)

Paul did not say, "You have got it right, we are "gods," just don't call us Zeus and Hermes; god Paul and god Barnabas will do." For Jews, tearing one's garment was a sign of utmost distress. To be called "gods" was unthinkable for the apostles. Though Paul and Barnabas were saved, and those who were wanting to sacrifice to them were yet unregenerate, Paul said that they were "men of the same nature." The nature of men is such that

they can never be gods. God is eternal, men are created. This cannot change. We can have eternal life that extends to the infinite future, but in the past we had a point in time beginning. There is only one God.

The Deity and Uniqueness

In ascribing Godhood to Jesus Christ, we are declaring His uniqueness. **Hebrews 11:6** says, "And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him." Jesus said, "I said therefore to you, that you shall die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am He, you shall die in your sins" (**John 8:24**). It is essential to believe that He is the great I AM for salvation.

The continuous, present tense Greek verb for "to be" is used to denote the eternal existence of our Lord. One primary, essential attribute of deity is **eternal, non-contingent existence**. This means that there was never a time that God did not exist, and that His existence is dependent on nothing other than Himself. God is, and never ceases to be. To say that Jesus is God is to say that this is true about Him.

Some claim that Jesus at least temporarily lost His deity. This cannot be true if Jesus is "I AM" as He claimed repeatedly in the Gospel of John, and if He is "the same yesterday and today, and forever" as **Hebrews 13:8** asserts. If Jesus was not God at anytime and was therefore dependent on something or someone else to become God, then His "deity" would be contingent and not true deity. Such teachings must therefore be rejected as heretical. Jesus by His eternal nature does not and cannot cease to be God.

The Gospel of John calls Jesus the "only begotten" one (see **John 1:14, 3:16**). This term means, "unique, only one of His kind" (NASB margin of **John 1:14**). Knowledge will never make one of us the same as Jesus, nor will it give us the abilities to do everything that He did. The Bible claims

that Jesus' works were such as to demonstrate and validate His claims to be the Messiah. In the end times, according to Matthew 24, many will come doing signs, claiming to be Messiahs (literally, "anointed ones"). Their claims are false and no one will ever be able to do everything that Jesus did and take His place as a new Messiah. Jesus is the Creator (**John 1:3 & Colossians 1:16**) and we are the created. That distinction can never be obliterated. To say that knowledge alone made Jesus unique, and that the obtaining of certain "revelation knowledge" will make us like Jesus is closely akin to the gnostic heresies that troubled the church of the first few centuries. We are dependent on our Lord to make us more like Jesus, in the sense of being sanctified, empowered to do His will, and longing to see Him so that we can be conformed to His image (see **1John 3:2-3**). There is, however, only one Lord and Christ and He is unique. We are not "little Christs" (Messiahs) any more than we are "little gods." There is only one Messiah.

The Great Commission

Many who teach that Christians are to be gods of the earth cite the Great Commission of **Matthew 28:18-19** as proof. "And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.'" Many teachers, some who do not agree that we can be gods, claim that this verse proves that Jesus gave His authority to us. The text says that "all authority has been given to Me (Jesus)." It does not say that it is given to us! Those who teach so use the verb "go" in the next verse as justification to jump to that conclusion. They assume that this amounts to a transference of His authority over the created universe (at least the earth) to us.

Various “dominion” doctrines depend on this interpretation of Matthew 28.

Delegated authority does not equal **transferred** authority. For example, when Caesar delegated to Pilate the authority to govern Judea for Rome, he did not thereby remove it from himself. He gave Pilate only the authority to do what he was commissioned to do, and that according to certain guidelines set by Caesar. The chief priests knew this and tried to use it to convince Pilate that it was in his best interests to crucify Jesus (**John 19:12**). If an owner of a company hires a worker and gives him authority to do a job, the owner does not thereby loose his authority over that aspect of his company. When Jesus said “Go therefore and make disciples” he gave the church the authority to make disciples. Disciples are those who enter through the cross into a relationship with Jesus in which He is the Master and they are His servants and learners.

He also gave the authority to baptize. It is **persons** who believe in Christ and accept the claims of the gospel who are to be baptized. Some have erroneously seen the term “nations” to mean that geo-political entities are to be taken over and ruled by Christians in fulfillment this passage. You cannot baptize a nation-state, a territory, or a political unit. You can only baptize a person. The use of the word nations (Greek “*ethnē*”) means that all the tribes (ethnic groups) of the world are to hear the gospel. From out of these God will save those persons who will make up the church. Clearly, **Matthew 28:19** does not give Christians godhood. Neither does it give us dominion over the political units of the world. Since Jesus has all authority, He has the right and power to send forth His followers with the task He has given them until He returns. Doing so does not give us authority over the world.

Even those who already exercise authority in a political sense are doing so because God allows it. **Romans 13:1b** says, “For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.” Jesus said to

Pilate, “You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above” (**John 19:11**). Both statements were made in the pagan Roman empire. God already had authority over the nations, even the unrighteous ones. He did not transfer His authority to the church, hoping it would somehow use it to gain control over the nations for Him. He sent us to rescue lost sinners from a rebellious society that is bent on doing evil. He is calling a church out of the world to show forth His glorious truth.

Jesus commissioned us to teach those who respond to the gospel to “observe all that I commanded you.” The past tense shows that the content of the message is His teaching recorded for us in the Bible. We have authority to teach God's word, not to be gods of the earth. There is only one God, the triune God of the Bible. We are His ambassadors, not His competitors in the godship arena. He has never relinquished His sovereign authority over the creation to anyone.

Jesus is the unique Son of God, who was sent by God to die a substitutionary death for our sins. The “gods” are idols (worshiped, created beings or things which lack the essential attributes of deity). We neither were created to be gods nor commissioned to become gods. We are called by God to preach to all of the nations His message of salvation through Jesus the Messiah. **2Corinthians 4:5** expresses the proper attitude, “For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake.” What a difference that is from preaching ourselves as little “gods” on the earth!

Appendix

The following is the part of the Nicene Creed about the nature of God:

We believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were

made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried, and the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father. And he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end. And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceedeth from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets.²

This statement was the church's response to Arius (250-336) who asserted that Jesus Christ was created, and therefore not eternal God.³

Bob DeWaay, Twin City Fellowship, P.O. Box 8068, Minneapolis, MN 55408; © 1992.

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End Notes

1. The Gospel of John, New Testament Commentary, William Hendriksen, Baker 1953 (1987 printing), page 128.
2. Quoted from An Evangelical Christology, Bernard Ramm, Nelson; 1985, pages 10,11.
3. *ibid.* pages 30,31.

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