

WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?

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Is Jesus really God?

Belief in His divinity is foundational to Christianity. Still, it is an *astonishing* claim. What evidence is there to back it up?

It is just here where *The Da Vinci Code* makes its most startling charge: that Jesus' followers only considered Him to be a human being until Roman Emperor Constantine "upgraded" His status to deity almost 300 years after His death.

Dan Brown's historian character, Sir Leigh Teabing, has many positive things to say about Jesus. He calls Him "a historical figure of staggering influence, perhaps the most enigmatic and inspirational leader the world has ever seen." He was, said Teabing, "the prophesied Messiah" who "possessed a rightful claim to the throne of the King of the Jews."

Indeed, virtually every religion has nice things to say about Jesus. Muslims and Bahais consider Him to be a great prophet. Hindus, Buddhists, and even some atheists find many of His teachings respectable. But Christians go further: each person's eternal destiny hangs on his or her personal response to Jesus as God.

What do you say Jesus was: a myth, a mere man, a great man, a wise teacher, a prophet, or God who became a man? What leads you to your conclusion?

Human Jesus

The Da Vinci Code claims that it was not until the fourth century that Jesus was deified by a religious coup d'état, that Constantine collated the books of the Bible, omitting the gospels that portrayed Jesus' human side in favor of the four that made Him God. Yet, this very human portrait emerges from the four gospels in our New Testament:

- He began life as an infant, born of a woman (Luke 2:6-7)
- He grew through the normal stages of childhood (Luke 2:52)
- He worked as a carpenter (Mark 6:3)
- He became hungry and thirsty (Matthew 4:2; John 19:28) [Compare this to the popular TV series, 24, where no one ever eats nor sleeps nor uses the toilet!]
- He became tired and fatigued (Mark 4:38)
- He experienced sadness and sorrow (John 11:35)
- He was amazed (Matthew 8:10)
- He functioned with limited knowledge (Matthew 24:36)
- He became angry (Mark 11:15-16; John 2:13-17)
- He was apprehensive about His impending suffering (Matthew 26:38)
- He was disappointed (Matthew 26:40-45)
- He bled and died (John 19:33-34)

However, *The Da Vinci Code* suggests that Christians *only* thought of Jesus as human until 325 A.D. when the Council at Nicea rewrote history and changed the heart of the Christian faith. In fact, the Church had been declaring Jesus' deity for more than 250 years.

Divine Jesus

As I affirmed last week, the four gospels of the New Testament are the only historical documents that can really be shown, with certainty, to be first-century documents, written within the first and second generations of Jesus' followers. No other gospels competed with that.

Do they come right out and claim that Jesus is God? Judge for yourself. Jesus' own words:

- "Before Abraham was, I AM." (John 8:58) Clearly, a reference to Exodus 3 and a claim to deity, for which His Jewish opponents, who understood the inference, immediately picked up stones to stone Him to death.
- "I and the Father are one." (John 10:30) Another clear reference to His divinity.
- "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father! (John 14:9) Again, He claims to be one and the same with God.
- "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the blessed God?" Jesus said, "I am, and you will see me, the Son of Man, sitting at God's right hand in the place of power and coming back on the clouds of heaven." (Mark 14:61-62) A reference to the divine Judge of Daniel 7 and a claim so clear that the high priest accused Him of blasphemy and He was condemned to death on the spot.

Furthermore, Jesus claimed:

- He would judge the world at the end of time (Matthew 7:21-23; John 5:22)
- He should be honored as much as God (John 5:23)
- He could impart eternal life to people (John 5:21,40)
- To know Him was to know God (John 8:19)
- To hate Him was to hate God (John 15:23)
- He could forgive sin (Mark 2:5,10)
- He had been with God in Heaven and shared divine glory (John 17:5)
- He could hear and answer prayers (John 14:14)
- He was omnipresent (after His resurrection). (Matthew 28:20; John 14:23)

Even though His claim to deity got Him in trouble repeatedly, Jesus never once denied it. When they picked up stones to kill Him, He could easily have said, "Wait a minute. You misunderstood me. Let me explain what I really meant." But He did not.

Jesus convinced His followers that He was really God-in-human-form by performing miracles (even the Jewish Talmud and the Islamic Koran concede that He worked supernatural feats). Two of His closest companions (John and Peter) reported His moral perfection, His sinless life. Against all mathematical odds, He fulfilled scores of specific ancient messianic prophecies. Finally, He rose from the dead, just as He had told them He would.

The followers of Jesus began to preach His resurrection and His deity immediately after His death. They were persuaded, even in the face of persecution.

History's Report

To this the apostles added their own written claims:

- "In the beginning the Word already existed. He was with God, and he was God. He was in the beginning with God. He created everything there is. So the Word became human and lived here on earth among us." (John 1:1-2,14) He was the Creator incarnate.

- “Although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.” (1 Corinthians 8:5-6) In this context, “Lord” is the same as God.
- “Christ is the visible image of the invisible God.” (Colossians 1:15) No fuzziness about that confession.
- “God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:9-11) A reference to Isaiah 45:23, in which God said, “To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.” Paul places Jesus in the same position as God, receiving homage as God does.
- “God promised everything to the Son as an inheritance, and through the Son he made the universe and everything in it. The Son reflects God’s own glory, and everything about him represents God exactly. He sustains the universe by the mighty power of his command. After he died to cleanse us from the stain of sin, he sat down in the place of honor at the right hand of the majestic God of heaven. (Hebrews 1:2-3) No mere prophet here, but “very God of very God.”

What’s more, His followers were willing to suffer persecution and die for these claims. Would anyone willingly die for what they knew to be a lie?

The Early Church fathers were not silent on this matter, either, writing long before the Council of Nicea:

- “God Himself was manifested in human form.” (Ignatius, A.D. 105)
- “It is fitting that you should think of Jesus Christ as of God.” (Clement, A.D. 150)
- “Being the first-begotten Word of God, is even God”; “Both God and Lord of hosts”; “The Father of the universe has a Son. And He...is even God.” (Justin Martyr, A.D. 160)
- “Our Lord, and God, and Savior, and King”; “He is God, for the name Emmanuel indicates this.” (Irenaeus, A.D. 180)
- “Christ our God.” (Tertullian, A.D. 200)
- “No one should be offended that the Savior is also God.” (Origen, A.D. 225)
- “He is not only man, but God also.” (Novatian, A.D. 235)
- “Jesus Christ, our Lord and God.” (Cyprian, A.D. 250)
- “He truly was and is...with God, and being God.” (Methodius, A.D. 290)
- “We believe Him to be God.” (Lactantius, A.D. 304)
- “Christ performed all these miracles...the duty of divinity.” (Arnobius, A.D. 305)

And many others from that time to this:

- C.S. Lewis: “Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about Him being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”
- John Stott: “Jesus made it clear by word and deed that to know Him was to know God, to see Him was to see God, to believe in Him was to believe in God, to receive Him was to receive God, to reject him was to reject God, and to honor Him was to honor God.”

For the record, the predominant conclusion of the Council at Nicea, known as the Nicene Creed (A.D. 325/381, Constantinople version), was as follows:

We believe in one God, the Father All-sovereign, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, and the only-begotten Son of God, Begotten of the Father before all the ages, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things were made; who for us men and for our salvation came down from the heavens, and was made flesh of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became man, and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried, and rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures, and ascended into the heavens, and sits on the right hand of the Father, and comes again with glory to judge living and dead, of whose kingdom there shall be no end:

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and the Life-giver, that proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and Son is worshipped together and glorified together, who spoke through the prophets:

In one holy catholic and apostolic church:

We acknowledge one baptism unto remission of sins. We look for a resurrection of the dead, and the life of the age to come.

Bringing It Home

[Jesus] asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

"Well," they replied, "some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, and others say Jeremiah or one of the other prophets."

Then he asked them, "Who do you say I am?"

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Jesus replied, "You are blessed, Simon son of John, because my Father in heaven has revealed this to you. You did not learn this from any human being. (Matthew 16:13-17)

Jesus told [Martha], "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die like everyone else, will live again. They are given eternal life for believing in me and will never perish. Do you believe this? (John 11:25-26)

Friends, I am telling you the truth: What *you say* and what *you believe* make all the difference. Paul put it this way:

If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by confessing with your mouth that you are saved. (Romans 10:9-10)

Who do *you say* that Jesus is? Is He your Forgiver and Leader? Is He God? Is He *your* God?