

Is Jesus God?

Have you ever met a man who is the center of attention wherever he goes? Some mysterious, indefinable characteristic sets him apart from all other men. Well, that's the way it was two thousand years ago with Jesus Christ. But it wasn't merely Jesus' personality that captivated those who heard him. Those who witnessed his words and life tell us that something about Jesus of Nazareth was different from all other men.

Jesus' only credentials were himself. He never wrote a book, commanded an army, held a political office, or owned property. He mostly traveled within a hundred miles of his village, attracting crowds who were amazed at his provocative words and stunning deeds.

Yet Jesus' greatness was obvious to all those who saw and heard him. And while most great people eventually fade into history books, Jesus is still the focus of thousands of books and unparalleled media controversy. And much of that controversy revolves around the radical claims Jesus made about himself—claims that astounded both his followers and his adversaries.

It was primarily Jesus' unique claims that caused him to be viewed as a threat by both the Roman authorities and the Jewish hierarchy. Although he was an outsider with no credentials or political powerbase, within three years, Jesus changed the world for the next 20 centuries. Other moral and religious leaders have left an impact—but nothing like that unknown carpenter's son from Nazareth.

What was it about Jesus Christ that made the difference? Was he merely a great man, or something more?

These questions get to the heart of who Jesus really was. Some believe he was merely a great moral teacher; others believe he was simply the leader of the world's greatest religion. But many believe something far more. Christians believe that God has actually visited us in human form. And they believe the evidence backs that up.

After carefully examining Jesus' life and words, former Cambridge professor and skeptic, C. S. Lewis, came to a startling conclusion about him that altered the course of his life. So who is the real Jesus? Many will answer that Jesus was a great moral teacher. As we take a deeper look at the world's most controversial person, we begin by asking: could Jesus have been merely a great moral teacher?

Great Moral Teacher?

Even those from other religions acknowledge that Jesus was a great moral teacher. Indian leader, Mahatma Gandhi, spoke highly of Jesus' righteous life and profound words.[1] Likewise, Jewish scholar Joseph Klausner wrote, "It is universally admitted ... that Christ taught the purest and sublimest ethics ... which throws the moral precepts and maxims of the wisest men of antiquity far into the shade." [2]

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount has been called the most superlative teaching of human ethics ever uttered by an individual. In fact, much of what we know today as "equal rights" actually is the result of Jesus' teaching. Historian Will Durant, a non-Christian, said of Jesus that "he lived and struggled unremittingly for 'equal rights'; in modern times he would have been sent to Siberia. 'He that is greatest among you, let him be your servant'—this is the inversion of all political wisdom, of all sanity." [3]

Many, like Gandhi, have tried to separate Jesus' teaching on ethics from his claims about himself, believing that he was simply a great man who taught lofty moral principles. This was the approach of one of America's Founding Fathers, President Thomas Jefferson, who cut and pasted a copy of the New Testament, removing sections he thought referred to Jesus' deity, while leaving in other passages regarding Jesus' ethical and moral teaching.[4] Jefferson carried around his cut and pasted New Testament with him, revering Jesus as perhaps the greatest moral teacher of all time.

In fact, Jefferson's memorable words in the Declaration of Independence were rooted in Jesus' teaching that

each person is of immense and equal importance to God, regardless of sex, race, or social status. The famous document sets forth, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights ...”

But one thing Jefferson didn’t answer: If Jesus falsely claimed to be God he couldn’t have been a good moral teacher. But did Jesus really claim deity? Before we look at what Jesus claimed, we need to examine the possibility that he was simply a great religious leader?

Great Religious Leader?

Surprisingly, Jesus never claimed to be a religious leader. He never got into religious politics or pushed an ambitious agenda, and he ministered almost entirely outside the established religious framework.

When one compares Jesus with the other great religious leaders, a remarkable distinction emerges. Ravi Zacharias, who grew up in a Hindu culture, has studied world religions and observed a fundamental distinction between Jesus Christ and the founders of other major religions.

“In all of these, there emerges an instruction, a way of living. It is not Zoroaster to whom you turn; it is Zoroaster to whom you listen. It is not Buddha who delivers you; it is his Noble Truths that instruct you. It is not Mohammad who transforms you; it is the beauty of the Koran that woos you. By contrast, Jesus did not only teach or expound His message. He was identical with His message.”[5]

The truth of Zacharias’ point is underscored by the number of times in the Gospels that Jesus’ teaching message was simply “Come to me” or “Follow me” or “Obey me.” Also, Jesus made it clear that his primary mission was to forgive sins, something only God could do.

In *The World’s Great Religions*, Huston Smith observed, “Only two people ever astounded their contemporaries so much that the question they evoked was not ‘Who is he?’ but ‘What is he?’ They were Jesus and Buddha. The answers these two gave were exactly the opposite. Buddha said unequivocally that he was a mere man, not a god—almost as if he foresaw later attempts to worship him. Jesus, on the other hand, claimed ... to be divine.”[6]

And that leads us to the question of what Jesus really did claim for himself; specifically, did Jesus claim to be divine?

Did Jesus Claim To Be God?

So what is it that convinces many scholars that Jesus claimed to be God? Author, John Piper explains that Jesus claimed power which uniquely belonged to God.

“...Jesus’ friends and enemies were staggered again and again by what he said and did. He would be walking down the road, seemingly like any other man, then turn and say something like, ‘Before Abraham was, I am.’ Or, ‘If you have seen me, you have seen the Father.’ Or, very calmly, after being accused of blasphemy, he would say, ‘The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.’ To the dead he might simply say, ‘Come forth,’ or, ‘Rise up.’ And they would obey. To the storms on the sea he would say, ‘Be still.’ And to a loaf of bread he would say, ‘Become a thousand meals.’ And it was done immediately.”[7]

But what did Jesus really mean by such statements? Is it possible Jesus was merely a prophet like Moses or Elijah, or Daniel? Even a superficial reading of the Gospels reveals that Jesus claimed to be someone more than a prophet. No other prophet had made such claims about himself; in fact, no other prophet ever put himself in God’s place.

Some argue that Jesus never explicitly said, “I am God.” It is true that he never stated the exact words, “I am God.” However, Jesus also never explicitly said, “I am a man,” or “I am a prophet.” Yet Jesus was undoubtedly

human, and his followers considered him a prophet like Moses and Elijah. So we cannot rule out Jesus being divine just because he didn't say those exact words, anymore than we can say he wasn't a prophet.

In fact, Jesus' statements about himself contradict the notion that he was simply a great man or a prophet. On more than one occasion, Jesus referred to himself as God's Son. When asked whether he thought it far-fetched for Jesus to be the Son of God, lead singer of U2, Bono, answered:

"No, it's not far-fetched to me. Look, the secular response to the Christ story always goes like this: He was a great prophet, obviously a very interesting guy, had a lot to say along the lines of other great prophets, be they Elijah, Muhammad, Buddha, or Confucius. But actually Christ doesn't allow you that. He doesn't let you off the hook. Christ says, No. I'm not saying I'm a teacher, don't call me a teacher. I'm not saying I'm a prophet...I'm saying I'm God incarnate." And people say: No, no, please, just be a prophet. A prophet we can take." [8]

Before we examine Jesus' claims, it is important to understand that he made them in the context of the Jewish belief in one God (monotheism). No faithful Jew would ever believe in more than one God. And Jesus believed in the one God, praying to his Father as, "the only true God." [9]

But in that same prayer, Jesus spoke of having always existed with his Father. And when Philip asked Jesus to show them the Father, Jesus said, "Philip, have I been with you so long and you don't know me? Whoever has seen me, has seen the Father." [10] So the question is: "Was Jesus claiming to be the Hebrew God who created the universe?"

Did Jesus Claim To Be The God Of Abraham & Moses?

Jesus continually referred to himself in ways that confounded his listeners. As Piper notes, Jesus made the audacious statement, "Before Abraham was, I AM." [11] He told Martha and others around her, "I AM the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he is dead, yet shall he live." [12] Likewise, Jesus would make statements like, "I AM the light of the world," [13] "I AM the only way to God," [14] or, "I AM the truth." [15] These and several other of his claims were preceded by the sacred words for God, "I AM" (ego eimi) [16]. What did Jesus mean by such statements, and what is the significance or the term, "I AM"?

Once again, we must go back to context. In the Hebrew Scriptures, when Moses asked God His name at the burning bush, God answered, "I AM." He was revealing to Moses that He is the one and only God who is outside of time and has always existed. Incredibly, Jesus was using these holy words to describe himself. The question is, "Why?"

Since the time of Moses, no practicing Jew would ever refer to himself or anyone else by "I AM." As a result, Jesus' "I AM" claims infuriated the Jewish leaders. One time, for example, some leaders explained to Jesus why they were trying to kill him: "Because you, a mere man, have made yourself God." [17]

Jesus' usage of God's name greatly angered the religious leaders. The point is that these Old Testament scholars knew exactly what he was saying—he was claiming to be God, the Creator of the universe. It is only this claim that would have brought the accusation of blasphemy. To read into the text that Jesus claimed to be God is clearly warranted, not simply by his words, but also by their reaction to those words.

C. S. Lewis initially considered Jesus a myth. But this literary genius who knew myths well, concluded that Jesus had to have been a real person. Furthermore, as Lewis investigated the evidence for Jesus, he became convinced that not only was Jesus real, but he was unlike any man who had ever lived. Lewis writes,

"Then comes the real shock,' wrote Lewis: 'Among these Jews there suddenly turns up a man who goes about talking as if He was God. He claims to forgive sins. He says He always existed. He says He is coming to judge the world at the end of time.'" [18]

To Lewis, Jesus' claims were simply too radical and profound to have been made by an ordinary teacher or religious leader. (For a more in-depth look at Jesus' claim to deity, see "Did Jesus Claim to be God?" at <http://y-jesus.com/more/jcg-jesus-claim-god.php/>)

What Kind Of God?

Some have argued that Jesus was only claiming to be part of God. But the idea that we are all part of God, and that within us is the seed of divinity, is simply not a possible meaning for Jesus' words and actions. Such thoughts are revisionist, foreign to his teaching, foreign to his stated beliefs, and foreign to his disciples' understanding of his teaching.

Jesus taught that he is God in the way the Jews understood God and the way the Hebrew Scriptures portrayed God, not in the way the New Age movement understands God. Neither Jesus nor his audience had been weaned on Star Wars, and so when they spoke of God, they were not speaking of cosmic forces. It's simply bad history to redefine what Jesus meant by the concept of God.

Lewis explains,

Now let us get this clear. Among Pantheists, like the Indians, anyone might say that he was a part of God, or one with God....But this man, since He was a Jew, could not mean that kind of God. God, in their language, meant the Being outside the world, who had made it and was infinitely different from anything else. And when you have grasped that, you will see that what this man said was, quite simply, the most shocking thing that has ever been uttered by human lips.[19]

Certainly there are those who accept Jesus as a great teacher, yet are unwilling to call him God. As a Deist, we've seen that Thomas Jefferson had no problem accepting Jesus' teachings on morals and ethics while denying his deity.[20] But as we've said, and will explore further, if Jesus was not who he claimed to be, then we must examine some other alternatives, none of which would make him a great moral teacher. Lewis, argued, "I am trying here to prevent anyone from saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say." [21]

In his quest for truth, Lewis knew that he could not have it both ways with the identity of Jesus. Either Jesus was who he claimed to be—God in the flesh—or his claims were false. And if they were false, Jesus could not be a great moral teacher. He would either be lying intentionally or he would be a lunatic with a God complex.

Could Jesus Have Been Lying?

Even Jesus' harshest critics rarely have called him a liar. That label certainly doesn't fit with Jesus' high moral and ethical teaching. But if Jesus isn't who he claimed to be, we must consider the option that he was intentionally misleading everyone.

One of the best-known and most influential political works of all time was written by Niccolò Machiavelli in 1532. In his classic, *The Prince*, Machiavelli exalts power, success, image, and efficiency above loyalty, faith, and honesty. According to Machiavelli, lying is okay if it accomplishes a political end.

Could Jesus Christ have built his entire ministry upon a lie just to gain power, fame, or success? In fact, the Jewish opponents of Jesus were constantly trying to expose him as a fraud and liar. They would barrage him with questions in attempts to trip him up and make him contradict himself. Yet Jesus responded with remarkable consistency.

The question we must deal with is: What could possibly motivate Jesus to live his entire life as a lie? He taught that God was opposed to lying and hypocrisy, so he wouldn't have been doing it to please his Father. He certainly didn't lie for his followers' benefit, since all but one were martyred rather than renouncing his Lordship (see "Did the Apostles believe Jesus is God?" at <http://y-jesus.com/more/ajg-apostles-jesus-god.php/>). And so we are left with only two other reasonable explanations, each of which is problematic.

Benefit

Many people have lied for personal gain. In fact, the motivation of most lies is some perceived benefit to oneself. What could Jesus have hoped to gain from lying about his identity? Power would be the most obvious answer. If people believed he was God, he would have tremendous power. (That is why many ancient leaders, such as the Caesars, claimed divine origin.)

The rub with this explanation is that Jesus shunned all attempts to move him in the direction of seated power, instead chastising those who abused such power and lived their lives pursuing it. He also chose to reach out to the outcasts (prostitutes and lepers), those without power, creating a network of people whose influence was less than zero. In a way that could only be described as bizarre, all that Jesus did and said moved diametrically in the other direction from power.

It would seem that if power was Jesus' motivation, he would have avoided the cross at all costs. Yet, on several occasions, he told his disciples that the cross was his destiny and mission. How would dying on a Roman cross bring one power?

Death, of course, brings all things into proper focus. And while many martyrs have died for a cause they believed in, few have been willing to die for a known lie. Certainly all hopes for Jesus' own personal gain would have ended on the cross. Yet, to his last breath, he would not relinquish his claim of being the unique Son of God. New Testament scholar, J. I. Packer, points out that this title asserts Jesus' personal deity.[22]

A Legacy

So if Jesus was above lying for personal benefit, perhaps his radical claims were falsified in order to leave a legacy. But the prospect of being beaten to a pulp and nailed to a cross would quickly dampen the enthusiasm of most would-be superstars.

Here is another haunting fact. If Jesus were to have simply dropped the claim of being God's Son, he never would have been condemned. It was his claim to be God and his unwillingness to recant of it that got him crucified.

If enhancing his credibility and historical reputation was what motivated Jesus to lie, one must explain how a carpenter's son from a poor Judean village could ever anticipate the events that would catapult his name to worldwide prominence. How would he know his message would survive? Jesus' disciples had fled and Peter had denied him. Not exactly the formula for launching a religious legacy.

Do historians believe Jesus lied? Scholars have scrutinized Jesus' words and life to see if there is any evidence of a defect in his moral character. In fact, even the most ardent skeptics are stunned by Jesus' moral and ethical purity.

According to historian Philip Schaff, there is no evidence, either in church history or in secular history that Jesus lied about anything. Schaff argued, "How, in the name of logic, common sense, and experience, could a deceitful, selfish, depraved man have invented, and consistently maintained from the beginning to end, the purest and noblest character known in history with the most perfect air of truth and reality?"[23]

To go with the option of liar seems to swim upstream against everything Jesus taught, lived, and died for. To most

scholars, it just doesn't make sense. Yet, to deny Jesus' claims, one must come up with some explanation. And if Jesus' claims are not true, and he wasn't lying, the only option remaining is that he must have been self-deceived.

Could Jesus Have Been Self-Deceived?

Albert Schweitzer, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1952 for his humanitarian efforts, had his own views about Jesus. Schweitzer concluded that insanity was behind Jesus' claim to be God. In other words, Jesus was wrong about his claims but didn't intentionally lie. According to this theory, Jesus was deluded into actually believing he was the Messiah.

Lewis considered this option carefully. He deduced that if Jesus' claims weren't true, then he must have been insane. Lewis reasons that someone who claimed to be God would not be a great moral teacher. "He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell." [24]

Most who have studied Jesus' life and words acknowledge him as extremely rational. Although his own life was filled with immorality and personal skepticism, the renowned French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) acknowledged Jesus' superior character and presence of mind, stating, "When Plato describes his imaginary righteous man...he describes exactly the character of Christ. ...If the life and death of Socrates are those of a philosopher, the life and death of Jesus Christ are those of a God." [25]

Bono concludes that a "nutcase" was the last thing one could label Jesus.

"So what you're left with is either Christ was who He said He was—or a complete nutcase. I mean, we're talking nutcase on the level of Charles Manson....I'm not joking here. The idea that the entire course of civilization for over half of the globe could have its fate changed and turned upside down by a nutcase, for me that's far-fetched...." [26]

So, was Jesus a liar or a lunatic, or was he the Son of God? Could Jefferson have been right by labeling Jesus "only a good moral teacher" while denying his deity? Interestingly, the audience who heard Jesus—both believers and enemies—never regarded him as a mere moral teacher. Jesus produced three primary effects in the people who met him: hatred, terror, or adoration.

The claims of Jesus Christ force us to choose. As Lewis stated, we cannot put Jesus in the category of being just a great religious leader or good moral teacher. This former skeptic challenges us to make up our own minds about Jesus, stating,

"You must make your choice. 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 His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to." [27]

In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis explores the options regarding the identity of Jesus, concluding that he is exactly who he claimed to be. His careful examination of the life and words of Jesus led this great literary genius to renounce his former atheism and become a committed Christian.

The greatest question in human history is, "Who is the real Jesus Christ?" Bono, Lewis, and countless others have concluded that God visited our planet in human form. But if that is true, then we would expect him to be alive today. And that is exactly what his followers believe.

Did Jesus Really Rise From The Dead?

The eyewitnesses to Jesus Christ actually spoke and acted like they believed he physically rose from the dead after his crucifixion. If they were wrong then Christianity has been founded upon a lie. But if they were right, such a miracle would substantiate all Jesus said about God, himself, and us.

But must we take the resurrection of Jesus Christ by faith alone, or is there solid historical evidence? Several skeptics began investigations into the historical record to prove the resurrection account false. What did they discover?

Did Jesus Say What Happens After We Die?

If Jesus really did rise from the dead, then he must know what is on the other side. What did Jesus say about the meaning of life and our future? Are there many ways to God or did Jesus claim to be the only way? Read the startling answers in “Why Jesus?” at <http://y-jesus.com/wwrj/7-jesus-relevant-today.php/>.

Can Jesus Bring Meaning To Life?

Can Jesus answer the big questions of life: “Who am I?” “Why am I here?” And, “Where am I going?” Jesus made claims about life and our purpose here on earth that need to be examined before we write him off as uncaring or impotent. This article, “Why Jesus,” examines the mystery of why Jesus came to earth, and what that means to us.

Endnotes

1. Quoted in Robert Elsberg, ed., *A Critique of Gandhi on Christianity* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 26 & 27.
2. Joseph Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1946), 43, 44.
3. Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy* (New York: Washington Square, 1961), 428.
4. Ina Kulman and Jay Tolson, “The Jesus Code,” *U. S. News & World Report*, December 22, 2003, 1.
5. Ravi Zacharias, *Jesus among Other Gods* (Nashville, TN: Word, 2000), 89.
6. Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 150.
7. John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2000), 35.
8. Bono, quoted in, Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York: Penguin Group Publishers, 2008), 229.
9. John 17:3.
10. John 14:9
11. John 8:58.
12. John 11:25
13. John 8:12
14. John 14:6
15. Ibid.
16. For the meaning of “ego eimi.” See, http://www.y-jesus.com/jesus_believe_god_2.php
17. John 10:33
18. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), 51.
19. Lewis, Ibid.
20. A Deist is someone who believes in a standoffish God—a deity who created the world and then lets it run according to pre-established laws. Deism was a fad among intellectuals around the time of America's independence, and Jefferson bought into it.
21. Lewis, 52.
22. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 57.
23. Philip Schaff, *The Person of Christ: The Miracle of History* (1913), 94, 95.
24. Lewis, 52.
25. Schaff, 98, 99.
26. Bono, Ibid.

27. Lewis, 52.

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