

Encountering Jesus: A look at his Claims and Character

By Tim Keller and David Bisgrove

*"A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic - on the level with a man who says he is a poached egg - or he would be the devil of hell. You must take your choice. Either this was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool 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."*¹

In the Gospel of Mark we are told that Jesus asked his disciples what the 'word on the street' was about himself: "Who do men say that I am?" Of course then, like now, there were many answers, underscoring the fact that in a short period of time Jesus had become a fascination to many. Today Jesus remains a popular and fascinating figure despite the fact that the religion that bears his name is often viewed negatively and culturally passé. Why is this? At one level it is because the life of Jesus is beautiful, and we are naturally drawn to beauty. Furthermore, he was a person of enormous historical significance, creating a movement that has impacted millions of lives through the centuries. But in the end, the question Jesus asked his followers that day is the only question that ultimately matters. The life of Jesus requires us to personally come to grips with who he is. All of us face the temptation to tame Jesus, to construct a Jesus of our own making, one that makes no claims upon us—in short, a Jesus completely unlike the Jesus we find in the historical accounts in the Gospels. Because in the Gospels we find a person unlike any other who has ever lived--a person whose claims and character require us to either accept him as the divine Son of God or reject him as just another self-deluded demagogue.

Therefore what follows below is a brief survey of his claims and character that we hope will help you answer the question Jesus asks of us all – who do you say that he is?

The Claims of Jesus

In all the world's major religions, only Buddha and Jesus so impressed their contemporaries that they were not just asked "who are you?" but "what are you?" Yet, Buddha's and Jesus' answer to this question could not have been more different. Buddha denied that he was divine, but Jesus repeatedly and continually claimed to be the God and Creator of the universe. C.S. Lewis rightly points out that if Jesus' claims are "not true, [they] are those of a megalomaniac, compared with whom Hitler was the most sane and humble of men."² (C.S.Lewis)

So what were some of those claims? First we find some astounding indirect claims.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity : The Case for Christianity, Christian Behaviour and Beyond Personality* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 3 Edition, 2001), 52

² C. S. Lewis, *The Essential C.S. Lewis* (Touchstone, 1996) 331.

- (1) Jesus assumed authority to forgive all sins (Mark 2:7-10)--not merely sins against him. Imagine that someone broke into your apartment and stole your computer. Then imagine someone else came along and unilaterally pronounced your robber forgiven. You would rightly dismiss the person as deluded and irrelevant to the theft you experienced. Yet this is exactly what Jesus claimed he could do. Since we can only forgive sins that are against us, Jesus' premise is that all sins are against him, and therefore that he is God whose laws are broken and whose love is offended in every violation.
- (2) Jesus claimed that he alone could give eternal life (John 6:39,40), though God alone has the right to give or take life. More than that, Jesus claimed to have a power that could actually eliminate death, and he claims not just to have or bring a power to raise the dead, but to *be* the Power that can destroy death (John 11: 25-26).
- (3) Jesus claimed to have the truth as no one else ever has. All prophets said, "thus saith the Lord" but Jesus teaches with "but I say unto you" out of his own authority (Mark 1:22; Luke 4:32) And more than that, he claims not just to have or bring truth, but to be the Truth itself, the source and locus of all truth (John 14:6).
- (4) Jesus assumed the authority to judge the world (Mark 14:62). Since God alone has both the infinite knowledge and the right (as Creator and owner) to evaluate every person, Jesus' premise is that he has both these divine attributes. More than that, Jesus claimed that we will be judged in the end primarily on our attitude toward him (Matt.10:32,33; John 3:18).
- (5) Jesus assumed the right to receive worship (John 5:23, 9:38; Luke 5:8; John 20:28-29) which neither great persons nor even angels would accept (Rev.22:8,9; Acts 14:11-15).
- (6) Even his off-hand statements and actions continually assume that he has divine status. He claims to have sent all the prophets and wise teachers in the world through all the centuries (Matt.23:34). Which is a claim that he is eternal. He comes to the temple and says that all the rules about observing the Sabbath are no longer applicable because the inventor of the Sabbath is now here (Mark 2:23-28). Which is a claim that he is the Creator.
- (7) He puts his own knowledge on a par with God the Father's (Matt.11:27) (So he claims to be all-knowing).
- (8) He claimed to be perfectly sinless (John 8:46). (So he claims to be completely holy.)

Then there are Jesus' direct claims in which he said:

- (1) To know him is to know God (John 8:19),
- (2) to see him was to see God (John 12:45),
- (3) to receive him is to receive the God (Mark 9:37).

At this point, we must remember how different Judaism was from all other religions of the time. Eastern religions were "pantheistic" and understood God to be the spiritual force in everything, so to say "I am part of God" or "I am one with God" is not terribly unusual. Western religions were "polytheistic" and believed in various gods who could take on human forms. But Jesus was Jewish. When he described God, he meant the

eternal (no beginning and no end) Creator God who was infinitely exalted above everything else. This is the most stupendous claim that anyone has ever made. And he did not make it once or twice. Rather, it was the foundation which supported everything he said and did.

It is impossible to minimize Jesus' claims. What would be your reaction if you heard a man saying "I have always existed", "I created the world", "I am ultimate reality", "I will return at the end of time and your fate will depend on your faith in me." You would most likely reject him. Perhaps you would fear or attack him, but you could not consider him a fine moral teacher. Jesus did not leave us that option.

The Character of Jesus

What about the possibility that he was a fraud? There have been plenty of power-hungry cult leaders who claimed to be divine. This brings us to the second part of the challenge of Jesus Christ. What is startling is not just that his claims that were so self-centered, but that his character and his actions were completely other-centered. He combines qualities that no one ever has. The accounts of him in the New Testament speak for themselves. Despite his incredible claims, we never see him pompous or oppressive or standing on his own dignity. He is absolutely approachable to the weakest and most broken people, yet he is completely fearless before the proud and the powerful. Despite being profoundly human, and becoming weary and lonely and moved to joy and love and anger, we never see him moody or inconsistent or being strong when he should have been tender or tender where he should be strong. Most interesting of all, in the accounts of his dealings with people, he is continually surprising us, shocking us, yet never disappointing us. One writer summed it up with a remarkable challenge:

"No one has ever yet discovered the word Jesus ought to have said or the deed he ought to have done. Nothing he does falls short, in fact, he is always surprising you and taking your breath away, because he is incomparably better than you could imagine for yourself. He is tenderness without weakness, strength without harshness, humility without the slightest lack of confidence, holiness and unbending convictions without the slightest lack of approachability, power without insensitivity, passion without prejudice. There is never a false step, never a jarring note. This is life at the highest."³

In summary, the claims of Jesus make it impossible that he was just a good man. The character and teaching of Jesus make it impossible to believe that he was a deceiver or insane.

This brings us full circle. Who do you say that Jesus is? Does it seem crazy and ridiculous to believe that a human being could be God? Amazing--yes. But why is it ridiculous? Once we remove a dogmatic bias against miracles, then one could argue that it is even more crazy and ridiculous to believe the alternatives. How could a man who lived an unparalleled life and produced unrivaled teaching be a liar or a lunatic? How could a man make the claims he did and make good on them? How could

³ John H. Gerstner, *Theology for Everyman* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965) 45.

hundreds of people be deceived into thinking they saw him alive after his bodily resurrection? Yet if they were not deceived, but deceivers, why would have they lived and died sacrificially for a hoax? As hard as it is to believe that he is God come to earth, it is more difficult to deny it. Is it really impossible for God to become human? Why, if God is really all powerful, could he not have done it? And why, if God is really all-loving, would he not have done it?

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