

In our *Explore God* series we are considering some of the ultimate questions in life. They are broad questions that provoke all sorts of opinions and stimulate meaningful conversation. Today we come to the most penetrating question of all. It is a question that provides the center of gravity for the Christian faith. One day Jesus asked Peter, “Who do you say that I am?” The angels held their breath as they waited for Peter’s answer. They didn’t have to wait long – it was Peter after all. The answer would determine not only Peter’s future but the future of the whole world. I want to consider that question this morning. Who do you say Jesus is? Or, in *Explore God* terms, “Is Jesus God?”

There is no shortage of opinions about Jesus. He has been described as a good man, the Son of God, a Prophet, a Galilean rabbi, a teacher of God’s Law, the Embodiment of God’s Love, a reincarnated Spirit Master, the Ultimate Revolutionary, the Messiah of Israel, Savior, a man like any other, King of Kings, a misunderstood teacher, Lord of the Universe, a fool who thought he was God’s Son, or a fabrication of the early church. That’s the position Dan Brown put forth in the *DaVinci Code*. One of the characters says, “Scholars claim that the early Church literally stole Jesus from His original followers, hijacking His human message, shrouding it in an impenetrable cloak of divinity, and using it to expand their own power.” The assumption is that devotion to Jesus as divine Savior and Lord evolved over the first three centuries. One writer says, “If Jesus had any idea that people today were trying to turn him into some kind of god and they were actually worshiping him, he would roll over in his grave.” Stay tuned on that grave thing!

The position of the Christian church has always been that Jesus is God. The Nicene Creed of 325 A.D. says, “I believe in one 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 [essence] with the Father.”

Let’s consider three compelling arguments for the deity of Christ.

I. Jesus said He was God. One of the common statements offered up by those who do not worship Jesus is that He never claimed to be God. Let’s look at a couple of verses in John’s gospel and see if that holds up.

John 5:15-18 – Jesus’ claimed to be God’s son. To the Jews this was blasphemy because Jesus was making Himself equal to God. If Jesus is the divine Son of God then there must be two Gods. This was unacceptable to Jews who were monotheists believing in one God.

John 8:56-58 – “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.’ So the Jews said to him, ‘You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?’ Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.’ So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.” Why would they want to stone Him? Improper use of grammar? No. He claimed to be God. And He wasn’t interested in clearing up any confusion about the matter.

John 10:30-33 – “I and the Father are one.’ The Jews picked up stones again to stone him. Jesus answered them, ‘I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you going to stone me?’ The Jews answered him, ‘It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God.’” There are many other places where Jesus brazenly claims to be God and does not stutter. John 14:9, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”

Ravi Zacharias points out that all religions have their messengers who point people to God. But Jesus not only taught a message, He was identical with His message. He did not just proclaim the truth. He said, “I am the truth.” He did not just show a way. He said, “I am the Way.” He did not just open the door to life, He said, “I am the door.” “I am the Good Shepherd.” “I am the resurrection and the life.” “I am the I AM.” He does not just offer the bread of life. He is the bread. Is He God or a fraud? Let’s consider what He did.

The Bible contains a record of Jesus performing many amazing miracles, described as “signs” through which he revealed his glory or His identity. Jesus healed people physically, cast out demons, turned water into wine, calmed raging storms, multiplied food, walked on water, and even raised people from the dead. But his greatest miracle was his own resurrection. If a man can predict his own death and resurrection, and pull it off, then at least we should consider whatever else he said and did.

II. Jesus said He was God and the resurrection proves it. One of the earliest Christian creeds was written just 15-20 years after Jesus died. It is found in 1 Cor. 15:3-8. Let’s take a look at 4 very simple but very important assertions in these 6 verses.

a. Jesus died (v. 3). The simple fact that Jesus lived and died is supported by numerous non-Christian documents. Tacitus was a first century Roman historian. He said, “Christus, the founder of the [Christian] name, was put to death by Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea in the reign of Tiberius.” Celsus, a 2nd century opponent of Christianity said, “Jesus accordingly exhibited after his death only the appearance of wounds received on the cross, and was not in reality so wounded as he is described to have been.” John Dominic Crossan, one of the originators of The Jesus Seminar in the 1980s that identified 80% of the NT as non-historical myth even says, “That Jesus was crucified is as sure as anything historical can ever be.”

b. Jesus was buried (v. 4). All four gospels report that a rich man named Joseph of Arimathea showed up after the crucifixion to take care of the body. This implies that the Romans didn’t care what happened to the body and, more embarrassingly, His 12 disciples who saw Jesus do many miracles, who staked their lives on him, did not have the decency or the courage to claim the body.

Historians say this fits the category of “historical embarrassment,” one of the tests for the authenticity of an ancient document. In other words, if a document creates problems for the supposed motive of the writer it is usually deleted faster than Hillary Clinton’s emails. The accounts of the events surrounding the resurrection are too problematic to be fabrications. This helps establish the likelihood that the account is true.

Another example of historical embarrassment is the fact that the first witnesses to the resurrection were women. In the male-dominated, patriarchal culture of Jesus' time women were not even allowed to testify. So if you were trying to persuade people about the reality of the resurrection you wouldn't use women as witnesses – unless it was true.

c. Jesus was raised. (v. 4). Neither Jews nor Greeks believed in an individual bodily resurrection. The Jews believed in a general resurrection of the righteous at the end of time but the idea of an individual being resurrected was inconceivable. The Greeks and Romans believed the soul or spirit was good and the physical world was weak and corrupted and passing away. So a bodily resurrection was undesirable. No soul, having gotten free of its body, would want it back.

If Jesus' body was gone there was an empty tomb that had to be explained. Some options:

- The disciples stole the body and claimed Jesus was alive. This theory assumes that Jews suddenly believed an individual resurrection. They did not.
- The swoon theory. Jesus didn't die but was resuscitated in the cool tomb.
- They buried him in the wrong tomb. Why didn't the opponents prove that he was in another tomb? Here's the point - you don't have theories about an empty tomb unless there was an empty tomb. You don't have theories about who killed Kennedy unless someone killed Kennedy.

d. Jesus appeared to eyewitnesses. (vv. 5-8). There were multiple eyewitnesses identified in a public document. One of the most convincing eyewitnesses was a man who was neither a Jew nor a follower of Christ. He was a Roman soldier. The centurion who was an eyewitness to Jesus' crucifixion concluded, "Surely this was the son of God." (Mk. 15:39). In the Greco-Roman world "son of God" implied divinity. Emperors were sons of God. The Roman soldier at the foot of the cross was not a theologian with a fully developed Christology, he just knew that this man said and did things that ordinary men don't say and do. Another great soldier by the name of Napoleon once said, "I know men, and I tell you that Jesus Christ is no mere man. Between him and every other person in the world there is no possible term of comparison."

These eyewitnesses willingly gave their lives to spread the message of the resurrection. The early Christians endured intense persecution and would not change their story. In one historical document, Pliny the Younger who was Imperial Magistrate under the Emperor Trajan at the turn of the second century wrote to Trajan concerning his efforts to snuff out the growth of Christianity. "All the more I believed it necessary to find out what was the truth from two servant maids, which were called deaconesses, by means of torture. Nothing more did I find than a disgusting, fanatical superstition. Therefore I stopped the examination, and hastened to consult you...on account of the number of people endangered. For many of all ages, all classes, and both sexes already are brought into danger." People were willing to be tortured for their belief in the resurrection. As Blaise Pascal once said, "I [believe] those witnesses that get their throats cut."

The evidence for the resurrection is as solid as the evidence for any historical event. Chuck Colson, former hatchet man for Richard Nixon, was radically changed by the gospel. He once said, "I know the resurrection is a fact and Watergate proved it to me. How? Because 12 men testified that they had seen Jesus raised from the dead. Then they proclaimed that truth for 40 years never once denying it. Every one of them was beaten and tortured and stoned and put in prison. They would not have endured that if it weren't true. Watergate embroiled 12 of the most powerful men in the world and they couldn't keep a lie for three weeks. You're telling me 12 apostles could keep a lie for 40 years? Absolutely impossible."

So what do you think – God or fraud?

Tim Keller says, "If Jesus rose from the dead, then you have to accept all he said; if he didn't rise from the dead, then why worry about any of what he said? The issue on which everything hangs is not whether or not you like his teaching but whether or not he rose from the dead." Keller, p. 202.

III. Jesus said He was God, the resurrection proves it and I have experienced it. So have many of you in this room. You exhibit lives that have been radically transformed by Jesus. I wish we had time to hear some of the stories of those who have experienced a personal resurrection in their lives.

Now let's face it, some have not had that experience. "I haven't experienced what you say you have experienced. I acknowledge Jesus as an historical figure who is to be respected, as a great moral teacher but I can't get to the place where I believe He is God. How can I get from unbelief to belief? How can I cross over from skeptic to disciple?" There is only one way – by faith. You can contemplate it and debate it, argue about it and subject it to intellectual scrutiny but you can't reason your way across the Great Divide from doubter to disciple. You can't work your way across. You can't get across based on who you are related to. When the dust settles it finally comes down to a leap of faith. It's not as hard as you may think. You do it all the time. Let me illustrate faith.

Almost everyone in this room has traveled on an airplane in spite of the fact that few, if any, are aeronautical engineers. You can't explain how it works. In fact, it shouldn't! You are strapped in a metal tube that weighs thousands of pounds that is full of highly flammable jet fuel. A couple of people you don't even know and can't even see drive down a runway and climb into the sky. You don't know how yet you are willing to trust some engineers with calculators who say "We think this will work." So you just sit back and eat peanuts and drink Ginger Ale feeling pretty sure that you are going to end up where you said you wanted to go. That's faith. And faith will get you home.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life." Jn. 5:24