

Who is Jesus?

Matthew 16:13 When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" 14:They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15:"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" 16:Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." 17:Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven." (NIV)

No one has influenced the human race as much as Jesus. Indeed, every newspaper in the globe testifies that Jesus' life was the most influential ever lived. The Western world takes its entire dating system from this man's life, so he must be quite remarkable to achieve such a high profile. (NB Christ's birth has been more accurately dated around 6BC but this in no way affects the truth or reality of his coming into our world).

Someone once said: "Jesus entered the world 2000 years ago as a member of a poor family, in a small Jewish community, in one of the smallest countries in the world. He never wrote a book, but more books have been written about him than anyone else in history. He never raised an army, yet it is estimated that some 330,000 of his followers are martyred for their faith in him each year." That's quite some achievement for someone who had such small beginnings.

He is the hub of the wheel of Christianity and without Christ Christianity does not exist. Most other religions are based on philosophical propositions. If one were to remove the founding prophet or guru, the religion would remain essentially intact. This is not the case with Christianity, if you remove Christ but left his teaching then you would still not have Christianity, indeed Christianity would cease to exist. The whole faith rests entirely on the person of Jesus Christ and *who he is* rather than what he said. But did he even exist?

Jesus was a real historical man

Secular writings outside of the Bible affirm that Jesus actually existed. The historian Josephus (born AD 37) tells of the execution in AD 62 of James 'the brother of Jesus, the so-called Messiah.' In another part of his writings he describes Jesus as 'a wise man, who was a doer of wonderful works' (*Antiquities of the Jews*,

XVIII.33).

Pliny the Younger (AD 112) wrote about Christians saying that, 'they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when, they sang in alternate verse a hymn to Christ as to a god, and bound themselves to a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft, adultery, never to falsify their word, not to deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up.' (Henry Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian church* (Oxford University Press, 1988) p. 3,4).

Even in the recent Easter documentary *Son of God* shown by the BBC, Jeremy Bowen the presenter concluded; 'There is no doubt that Jesus actually existed.' Jesus was a real man of history and no serious historian would doubt this. Some people may well concede that Jesus was a real person and a good man, but they would be reluctant to credit him with more than that.

Yet the evidence within the New Testament does not permit us to simply acknowledge that he was just a nice man, for the claims of Jesus and the evidence from his life go far beyond that.

I doubt that there is anyone who would question the fact that Jesus was a most remarkable man in both his teachings, his purity and in his actions. But there have been others in this world that have lived extraordinary lives, take for instance Mahatma Gandhi the former president of India. He was a kind and gentle-natured man who lived for peace and tolerance among those of different cultures and religions. He rejected the use of force or aggression and not only taught, but lived what he believed. In most people's eyes, he was a fine upstanding man. Yet we may be surprised to find that his own candid view of himself was quite different from our perception of him. In his autobiography entitled *'My experiments with truth'* he writes the following words:

'I hope to acquaint the reader fully with all my faults and errors. In judging myself I shall try to be as harsh as truth, as I want others also to be. Measuring myself by that standard I must exclaim: 'Where is there a wretch so miserable and loathsome as I, I have forsaken my maker, so faithless have I been'.

For it is an unbroken torture to me that I am so far from Him, who, as I fully know, governs every breath of my life, and whose offspring I am. I know that it is

the evil passions within that keep me so far from him, and yet I cannot get away from them.'

(Richard Cunningham, *Discovering Christianity* (version 2, UCCF 1994) p. 59).

It may come as no surprise to us that Gandhi had faults, failings and fear just like you and I. However, when we come to Jesus the gospel writers make an extraordinary claim, which is this:

'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.' (1 Peter 2:22). (NIV)

Imagine someone who lived such a perfect life that even his closest companions could say that he never committed any sin! Could that be said of us, or anyone else that you know? I think not. Therefore there must have been something extraordinary about Jesus that statements of sinless perfection could be claimed about him. The answer to this lies in who Jesus claimed to be. He claimed to be God!

The claims of Jesus

The fundamental difference between Jesus and any other person that has existed is this: Jesus was no mere man. He claimed to be the Son of God, in other words God in flesh! Astonishing (and even incredible) as that might seem, that is exactly what the Bible teaches about Jesus' true identity. Indeed, this is what Jesus claimed about Himself, both indirectly by His actions, as well as verbally from His own mouth.

Jesus' direct claims to be God

Lets consider some of the passages from scripture where Jesus claims to be God:

'Jesus said, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too, am working." For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill Him, not only was He breaking the Sabbath, but He was even calling God His own Father, *making Himself equal with God*' (John 5:17-18, (NIV) italics mine).

This claim provoked accusations of blasphemy by His enemies because Jesus was claiming that God was His Father! That statement to a monotheistic (one God) culture of Judaism meant only one thing, that Jesus was claiming equality with God.

On another occasion; 'The Pharisees said to Jesus, "You are not yet fifty years old and you have seen Abraham!" "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, *"before Abraham was born, I am!"* At this they picked up stones to stone Him' (John 8:57-59, (NIV) italics mine). Here we see Jesus showing His eternal existence. This again was a claim that could only be

true of the eternal God.

On another occasion Jesus said, "I and the Father are one". Again the Jews picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus said to them, "I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?" "We are not stoning you for any of these," replied the Jews, "but for blasphemy, *because you, a mere man, claim to be God*" (John 10:30-33, (NIV) italics mine). This incident again shows that the Pharisees understood that Jesus was claiming to be God.

In addition to these *direct* claims from Jesus there are other *indirect* claims that support his deity.

The indirect claims to support Jesus' deity

After the resurrection of Jesus there was an incident where one of Jesus' disciples called Thomas was not present in the upper room when Jesus appeared the first time to his disciples. But Thomas was present on the second occasion of Jesus' resurrection appearance. This convinced Thomas that Jesus was God in flesh, hence his declaration, *'My Lord and my God!'* (John 20:26-31) (NIV).

Then there is the account of some men bringing a paralysed man for Jesus to heal and we are told; *'When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."* Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! *Who can forgive sins but God alone?"*" (Mark 2:5-7(NIV)). Indeed who can forgive sins except God! That is precisely why Jesus *could* forgive sins because he was God.

Just before the ascension of Jesus, we are told; 'the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. *When they saw him, they worshipped him*' (Matthew 28:16). Worship was something that was only reserved for God alone, indeed not even angels allowed people to worship them (e.g. Revelation 22:8-9) (NIV). The fact that Jesus did not prevent or dissuade his disciples from worshipping him was again an indirect claim to deity.

It is clear from scripture that Jesus claimed to be God.

Now anyone can claim to be God, and most of them are considered insane, so what is the evidence that Jesus' claims are based on reality? There are a number of pieces of evidence to substantiate Jesus'

claims, some of which we will now consider.

The miracles He performed

There are countless reports in the New Testament where Jesus healed the sick and raised the dead (see Matthew 4:23-24; 8:14-17; 8:28-34; 9:1-8; 9:18-34 to name but a few). The Apostle Peter appealed to the miracles of Jesus on the day of Pentecost as proof of Jesus' identity (Acts 2:22).

The resurrection of Jesus

Jesus both predicted his resurrection from the dead and proved beyond reasonable doubt to his disciples that he had been raised back to life. See the extensive evidence for this under: "The resurrection of Jesus Christ: myth or miracle?"

The teaching of Jesus

Lunatics can usually be exposed by the way they talk and act, take for instance David Coresh from the Branch Davidian cult at Waco, Texas, whose teaching and life were extremely odd. The Hitlers and Sadam Hussein's of this world are also people who have influenced others with their teaching, perhaps even mesmerised them, but when one examines what they say, alongside the example of their lives, it is not hard to distinguish a mad man from a sane man.

However, the teaching of Jesus has been used as a solid moral code for many nations and as a commendable way of living for individuals. At every point Jesus' teaching has not been bettered. Perhaps this was why people were as amazed with Jesus' teaching as they were with his miracles (Matt 7:28-29).

The character of Jesus

The apostle Peter writing about Jesus said this: 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in His mouth' (1 Peter 2:22). Would your friends be able to say the same about you? Even after being with Jesus for three years his disciples could find no deceit on his lips. Even the enemies of Jesus could not find any fault with him (Matthew 26:59-60). He was utterly trustworthy in everything that He said or did. He was truly perfect and his life cannot be bettered!

The disciples of Jesus

The disciples of Jesus were convinced about who He was, and were willing to die for their faith in Him. It is unlikely they would have been willing to make such a sacrifice if they had found inconsistencies in his life or

teaching.

The Old Testament prophecies concerning Jesus

There are sixty-one major prophecies about the coming Messiah, specifying His lineage, place of birth, healing and miracles etc. Twenty nine of these prophecies were fulfilled by Jesus in the 24 hours leading to his death (e.g. forsaken, crucified, none of his bones were broken, buried in a rich man's grave (Psalm 22; Isaiah 9:6-7; Isaiah 53; Isaiah 61:1-3).

It has been calculated that the probability of all these prophecies being fulfilled by any one man is 180 to the power of 10, to one chance. To put that into perspective the chances of winning the lottery are only 140 to the power of 5 to one (in other words a one in 14,000,000 chance).

Jesus died for His claims

In Marks Gospel there is an account of the trial of Jesus which comes to a climax when the High Priest questions Jesus, 'Again the High Priest asked him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" "I am," said Jesus... They all condemned him as worthy of death' (Mark 14: 61-64) (NIV). When Jesus was placed on trial for His life He had the opportunity to be set free if He denounced His claim to be God's Son. He didn't, why? Because He was telling the truth! Based on the evidence, there can only be three possible conclusions that you can reach regarding Jesus: he was either *mad*, *bad* or *God!*

1. Was he a madman who was severely deluded about who he was and that is why he was willing to die? I don't think so. As we have seen earlier a lunatic has flaws in his personality (which would have been spotted by his disciples). In addition, a lunatic would never have come out with the kind of wise teaching that Jesus did. So, this option in itself is rather mad.

2. Was he a liar who was the greatest of deceivers because he lived a lie in all that he did and said for his entire life? I don't think this is plausible either. Would a liar be willing to die for their lies? Most people lie in order to get themselves out of trouble - not into trouble! Besides, can you really believe that a man who expected the highest moral standards from his followers would himself be the biggest phoney of all?

3. Was he the Lord of all creation? All the evidence points to this as the only logical conclusion that fits the evidence. That's who the Bible says He is, but what

about you? Who do you say he is?

C.S. Lewis the famous writer and Oxford Don who was converted from atheism to Christianity said,

- *'I am trying here to prevent anyone 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 one thing we must not say. For a man who was merely man and said the sort of things that Jesus said would be the Devil of hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a mad man or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that option open to us, He didn't intend to.'* (C.S.Lewis, Mere Christianity publish by Fount pg 43).

Each of us must face up to the question Jesus put to His own disciples, 'Who do you say that I am?' (Mark 8:29) (NIV). Your life, indeed your soul, hangs on who Jesus really is! (John 3:36; 20:30-31)

Further reading

- C.S.Lewis, Mere Christianity publish by Fount (1997)
- Josh McDowell, *Evidence that demand a verdict* (Alpha 1998).
- Josh McDowell, *More than a carpenter* (Kingsway 1995).
- Bill Bright, *A man without equal* (Scripture Union 1988).
- Michael Green, *The day death died* (IVP 1988).
- Stephen Gaukroger, *It makes sense* (Scripture Union 1988)
- John Blanchard *Does God believe in atheists?* Evangelical Press 2000

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