

Reason

Belief In an age of Skepticism

study guide

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Is Jesus Who He Said He Is?

commentary

The deity of Christ has been drawn into question ever since he walked the earth. Some make the claim that he is merely a man and the church essentially "made" him a deity in the 4th century at the Counsel of Nicea. This claim is completely untrue and there is plenty of evidence to show that not only did followers of Christ believe he was God from the beginning, but also that we can believe he is God today.

It is clear that the early church believed Jesus was God. The counsel of Nicea did not come together in order to make Jesus a God some claim, rather the counsel was a response to heresies (specifically Arianism) that claimed Jesus was not divine. There would have been no reason to respond to this heresy if it were true, rather the counsel simply affirmed that which had already been seen as truth in the church. The New Testament contains the earliest documents available on the historical views of who Jesus was. These predate other documents decades, even centuries earlier and were written by people who actually walked with Christ while he was on earth. In John 1:1-3, Jesus' closest friend and disciple, John, wrote, "In the beginning was the Word [Jesus]. The Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made." Hebrews 1:3, another first century document reads, "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word." Another passage, written by the Apostle Paul, one of the early founders of the church wrote in Colossians 1:15-16, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him." In each of these passages, Jesus is not only identified as God, but as the creator of all things. These are a few of the explicit statements showing the deity of Christ, not to mention the hundreds of other implicit statements in scripture showing his deity as the One, True Creator God. The early church definitely believed Jesus was God well prior to the Counsel of Nicea.

Few question that Jesus even is a historical figure. No reasonable person today would argue that Jesus existed. The historical record (Christian and not) show that he existed. Anybody may go to Israel today and see the town where he was born, enter the places he taught and performed miracles, walk the roads he walked, and see the locations he was tried, crucified, buried, and resurrected. Nobody argues that Jesus is a historical figure.

Also, nobody really seems to have a problem with his basic ideology. People seem to appreciate his teaching on ethics and his concern for the poor and oppressed. Most enjoy the fact that he resisted the religious elite because of the legalism they imposed on others. His contribution in history is widely applauded.

What is it about Jesus that can divide a room in half? Why does he muster up so much controversy, even today as we've seen with the claims of the Da Vinci Code and supporters of coptic "gospels?" It is because he claimed to be the Son of God - the Savior of the Universe - the One True God. These statements have to send people to one side or the other because you either believe he is God, accept him, and let him rule your life, or you reject his claim to being God, and in the process, reject his message. He said things such as "No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Once he told the Jews "I and the Father are one" after which they were so enraged by his claim at deity that they threatened to stone him to death (John 10:24-33). His disciple Philip once asked Jesus if He could show him the Father to which Jesus replied, "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me?" When on trial, Jesus was asked if he is the Son of God (which meant that he was God) to which he answered "I am." ("I am" is the title God used to describe himself to Moses centuries earlier. Every Jew knew this and Jesus was claiming his own deity by using the phrase repeatedly during his life on earth). This caused the High Priest to rip his robe in outrage. Jesus claimed to be God and because of this, people are forced to believe in him as such, or reject him as such. There is no middle road.

So, what if Jesus' own claims to being the Son of God were not true? If this is the case, he either knew he was spreading false claims (making him a huge liar), or he had no idea he was spreading the false claims (making him a raving lunatic). It is not reasonable, however, to say that Jesus was a premeditated liar, pulling off the greatest hoax in all of history. Jesus' teachings set a new moral standard for his day. He was known for his moral teachings, so it is very unlikely that he could live such a duplicitous life. Would this person be able to ask people to give their lives to him, even if it meant being killed because of it? Not only this, but Jesus endured a brutal, torturous execution for claiming to be God. History shows that people tend not to die for a lie. As they were spitting on him, beating him, then finally driving spikes into his hands and feet, it seems that he would have spilled the truth had he been merely a liar. It is unreasonable to say that Jesus knew he was spreading lies, if in fact his claims were untrue.

If his claims to deity were false and he did not realize he was telling them, this would mean he had to have been a deranged lunatic. This does not seem plausible, either, because people who claim to be God typically have all sorts of problems and end up revealing patterns of instability and manifestations of psychosis throughout their lives. Jesus displayed no such tendencies or patterns. In fact, He was the picture of emotional, relational, and psychological health. His teaching was so brilliant that he stunned scholars. His relationships were incredibly secure. He was always calm in crisis and showed absolutely no propensity toward erratic behavior. He was a healthy and whole person with absolutely no signs of lunacy.

If he was not a lunatic or liar, then what? His claims to be the Son of God had to have been true! The evidence speaks for itself. For example, he led a perfect life. Jesus' adversaries could not find fault in him (John 8:46). Unlike other world religion leaders, Jesus led a perfect life.

He also displayed supernatural power. He calmed storms, helped the blind see, and made the lame walk (among numerous other miracles) and these miracles were not performed in secret. They were done in public where thousands of people could witness them, and even secular historians claim to have witnessed his miraculous powers. The religious leaders of the time were so flabbergasted by these works, that their only response was to attempt to show Jesus to be a hypocrite, demon-possessed, or Satan himself. They always failed in these attempts.

His supernatural power was most explicitly proved in his defeat of his own death. He rose from the dead three days after being crucified and buried. For skeptics of Jesus' deity, there is always the problem of the empty tomb. In other words, what happened to his body? How does one explain the more than 500 witnesses who saw him risen? Some say that, in protest, his detractors took his body. This doesn't seem likely, though, because once word started spreading about Jesus being risen from the dead, they would have paraded his body around to show that he was, indeed, dead. Others say his disciples had to have been the ones who stole his body to stage his resurrection. The biggest problem with this idea is that the tomb was guarded by well-trained, elite Roman soldiers. There is no way a rag-tag group of fishermen could have overcome them, let alone rolled away the huge stone in order to take Jesus' body. Also, Jesus' disciples were eventually imprisoned, tortured, and even put to death for spreading word that Jesus was the risen God. Once again, people tend not to die for lies. It seems that if this was the case, at least one of the disciples would have bended under these circumstances.

Evidence points to Jesus being exactly who he said he is - the Son of God, Savior of the world. If this is true one must determine which side they are on with the issue. Is Jesus God and worthy of following and worshiping? Or, shall he be rejected and we'll roll the dice with eternity? Which side are you on?

personal reflection

Sunday - Reflect on the evidence of Jesus' deity. Take some time to thank Jesus for creating the world around you, for giving you life, and for making eternal life possible for you - something only God could do.

Monday - Reflect on Philippians 2:5-11. Consider Jesus what a humble act it was for God to become human and take on the limits of humanity. What does this mean for you as you change to become more like Christ? How can you show your appreciation to God for doing this?

Tuesday - Reflect on Philippians 2:5-11 once more. How is it that Jesus was exalted? What led to this? How should this impact your life and worship toward Jesus?

Wednesday - Reflect on John 14:1-14. Looking at this passage, list the reasons why the fact that Jesus is God is a comfort to you when your heart is troubled?

Thursday - Reflect on John 10:24-33. What about Jesus' claim to being God is comforting? What about it is so controversial? In other words, why is Jesus so angering? How would you respond to these Jews if you had been there?

Friday - Reflect on John 14:6. In an age where there are so many perceived "paths" to God, how is it that this statement breaks the mould? What is your response to it? What, if any, is your resistance to it? Take time to pray for your faith to be strengthened despite the messages of our culture.

Saturday - Today, take some time to list in your journal all of the implications on your life because Jesus is God.

group discussion

1. What was your response to the message on Sunday? How were you left perplexed? How did you leave encouraged?
2. Read Colossians 1:15-16. Jesus is revealed as Creator. Go around and each person take some time tell what in God's creation they are particularly thankful for and why.
3. How does seeing Jesus as Creator enhance and/or change your view of him?
4. Read Philippians 2:5-11. What does this passage tell you about Jesus?
5. How might Jesus being "given the name above all names" be significant?
6. What led to Jesus' exaltation? How does this impact your worship of him?
7. How is the way Jesus is portrayed in this passage shed light on your life and interaction with others in the church? (hint: see 2:1-5)
8. Read John 10:24-33. What about his claims is so controversial? In other words, why is Jesus so angering?
9. How would you respond to these Jews if you had been there?

for further reading

The Reason for God, by Timothy Keller

Mere Christianity, by C.S. Lewis

The Case for Christ, by Lee Strobel

More Than a Carpenter, by Josh McDowell

