

Jesus: Liar, Lunatic, or Lord or...?

Mark 1: 1; John 1: 1

The famous author C. S. Lewis came to Christianity as an adult. His belief was compelled by a syllogism of logic as related in his book *Mere Christianity*. He was convinced that Jesus had to have been one of three things: Lord (who he said he was), a liar (in his claims to be the Son of God), or a lunatic (misguided or maybe insane).

Lewis concluded it must be one of these options and he decided Jesus was *Lord*. He was compelled by the power of logic. Is this syllogism compelling for us today? Is there an alternative?

The question for today, in our continuing summer series called *Ask Jack*, has two parts. They are really two different questions, though closely related. The first is, “How much do you think Christianity is dependent on Jesus’ divinity?” The second is, “Can you believe that Jesus was only flesh and blood and still call yourself Christian?”

Question one: “how much is Christianity dependent on the divinity of Jesus?” Institutional Christianity is heavily invested in the divinity of Jesus. It has been since the fourth century when two significant events occurred. Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine and a council of bishops meeting at Nicea adopted a creed. This Nicene Creed was the document that defined who was and who was not Christian in the Roman Empire. It was the first clear statement, as official dogma of the Church, that Jesus is divine and had been divine during his lifetime. He was Son of God and also God the Son.\

As a result, the Christian Church claimed exclusive control of the gates of Heaven. Their authority was based on Jesus’ divinity. This authority was passed on through the apostles, then through the clergy. The Church, in its various forms, continues the claim of exclusive power to this day.

Now we stand in a new day and people are asking, with increasing frequency, questions such as, “Can you believe Jesus was only flesh and blood and still call yourself Christian?” The answer to this question depends on where you’re standing – on your perspective.

If being Christian means for you affirming the Nicene Creed or similar theological formulations of the institutional church, your answer is “No.” You cannot be a Christian without accepting that Jesus was really God and only in the form of a human being. Jesus essentially paid lip service to his humanity with the real weight placed on his divinity.

If being Christian means following Jesus’ teachings and example, and if you choose to profess faith in God as reflected by Jesus, then your answer can be “Yes”. You can call yourself Christian without needing to believe that Jesus was God the Son.

There are some important issues related to the question for today. When Jesus lied on earth, was he indeed fully human? Was he, or not, exempted from human limitations and human foibles? Was he, or not, aware of the future? Was he, or not, God in disguise? How did Jesus see himself? How did his followers see him?

We cannot know for sure how Jesus saw himself. It’s also difficult to know how his followers saw him during his lifetime. The written material concerning Jesus we have was all written after his death and resurrection from the perspective of those who professed him as Lord. One window we do have is the absence of supernatural birth narratives in the very early Christian writings. Such narratives, appearing only in Matthew’s and Luke’s gospels, are designed to illustrate that Jesus was supernatural. In other words, the rest of the New Testament is silent regarding such a birth tradition.

Another window is that Jesus never seemed to point to himself and say, “Worship me!” On the contrary, he always pointed beyond himself to God.

What about the title *Son of God*? From where did it come and what did it mean? In Jesus’ day, the title *Son of God* was used for Caesar. When this same title was given to Jesus by his followers, it was to show that the Kingdom of God proclaimed and initiated by Jesus was more powerful and more important than the Roman Empire. It was Jesus, not Caesar, represented the true kingdom. This title did not originally mean *God the Son*.

The scripture passages for today underscore this idea. Mark’s gospel begins by speaking about the “good news of Jesus Messiah, the Son of God,” bringer of the Kingdom of God that is greater than Rome. It means no more than this, and also no less.

The famous prologue from John’s gospels states that “The Word was God.” This prologue is derived from Proverbs 8 in which Wisdom was in the beginning with God and was God. Later, in John’s prologue, the Word (Wisdom) takes flesh in Jesus. This is very different from saying, “Jesus was in the beginning with God” and that “Jesus was God”. Jesus embodies Wisdom.

Why are people today asking this question about the divinity of Jesus in ever increasing numbers? There are several reasons why this is becoming a lively issues in our time.

Biblical scholarship, that has long been raising questions about Jesus’ nature and traditional Christian claims, is now readily available to non-scholars. It is available in forms that are also readily understandable for most people. This includes more contemporary discoveries such as the Dead Sea Scrolls and the *Gnostic Gospels*.

We live in a challenging world situation. The nuclear age brings with it the reality of the potential for planetary destruction. Also, global warming and its risk of approaching ecological disaster calls into question the ability of organized religion to save us from ourselves.

We live in close contact with other religions and other cultures. Living multi-culturally calls into question many of the exclusive claims of Christianity. It is difficult to maintain that only Christians are pleasing God when we see people of other faiths living loving and faithful lives all around us.

Finally, the worldwide rise in fundamentalism tends to lead to a reaction against dogmatism and rigid theological structures of any kind. This reaction can even result in a rigidity that insists that only the “new theology” is worth believing. In truth, theological extremes that insist on people’s loyalty, whether to the left or to the right, tend to move us away from faith in God and toward faith in our theologies!

So, the questions have been answered. At least, I have answered them to the best of my ability. A bigger question remains: “to follow Jesus, do I have to accept and believe the whole pile of institutional Christian doctrine, including the Nicene Creed and formulations of theology represented by that creed.

For me, and for increasing numbers of faithful followers of Jesus and practitioners of the Christian faith, the answer is “no”. We cannot, and will not, accept the whole package of beliefs. Theology can guide faith and help frame our experiences, but faith is much broader and much deeper than our doctrine. Faith involves our whole lives, not just our intellects.

From the earliest of Christian writers, our understanding of the nature of Jesus -- how God was acting through Jesus -- has been growing and developing from an early and simple Jesus faith to a lengthy and complex statement like the Nicene Creed. With the adoption of that creed, theological exploration and development largely stopped for the institutional church. This works against the Holy Spirit who always promotes growth.

Where there is no growth, there is no life. It is the task of each generation of believers to discover anew the good news of Jesus. We must find the challenge of God through Jesus for our particular time, our generation, and our circumstances.

The questions for today challenge each of us. "How can I commit myself to the reality of God as taught and exemplified by Jesus"? "How can I experience faith that is freeing, inclusive, and life-evoking when so much of Christian history has been oppressive, exclusive, and deadly"? And "where will I find God if not in the dogmas and doctrines of religious faith?"

In response to that final question, and perhaps the others as well, I offer a possibility. This past week, many in our congregation attended Church Camp in the Rocky Mountains, at the Estes Park YMCA center. As we packed our cars to leave, we discovered in the parking lot area a large bull elk. He was calmly grazing just outside our building.

This magnificent animal was fully five feet high at the shoulder and six feet tall at the head. He also had a huge rack of antlers, another three feet high. Word spread fast. People stood in doorways and at windows with cameras in hand. Each one wore a look of wonder and awe. I stood there, too, awestruck and not doubting for a second that I was seeing God as I looked at that elk. I saw God, too, in the faces of those people -- faces filled with wonder at the sight. And I saw God, too, within myself and the sense of wonder I felt, the smile I knew was on my face.

Jesus showed us and brought us an ability to see with eyes of faith -- to see God in all of life: in the poor, the outcast, and in the surprising places in nature and in people -- in each of you

God, the universal reality and ground of all being, comes to us in the flesh and blood of our lives, in the joys and sorrows of our existence. It is here they saw the divine in Jesus of Nazareth long ago and for 2000 years since. It is here we see the divine today. Praise be to God who comes to us and partners with us, and calls us beyond ourselves, through Jesus in whom we Live and move and have our being. Amen.