

Is Jesus Really God?

John 1:1-18

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In *Letters from a Skeptic*, Edward Boyd, the skeptic, and his son Greg Boyd, a theologian, write to each other dealing with questions about Christian faith. After an exchange about Jesus' resurrection, Edward writes:

I must admit...that your arguments on the resurrection of Christ were surprisingly strong. ...Even if I can't agree with you, I must admit you stand on some pretty solid ground. It gives me a headache thinking about it because I think the event itself is so improbable. But there is evidence for it!

I don't feel like trying to nitpick at your evidence for the resurrection. I want to respond with a different approach. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that I conceded that Jesus did resuscitate or something. The grave was empty. That would be a strange event, for sure, but I'm wondering whether it alone proves that this man is everything the Christians want to make him. I mean, I've heard of other people coming back to life. Does this prove that they're God?

Look, unexplainable things happen a lot in this world. Look at all those strange "UFO" markings over in England. Maybe what happened in the first century was that an unexplainable event occurred, and in the face of this the disciples kind of flipped out and thought Jesus must be God. In fact, maybe it was only Paul who flipped out to this extent (he always struck me as a bit off his rocker anyway). I've heard that he was the one who first believed that Jesus was divine. The Gospels rather portray Jesus in more earthly terms, as a great man who could work wonders (something I'm willing to grant).

What I'm trying to do, Greg, is reconcile the force of your evidence with a worldview that makes more sense to me. Concluding that Jesus was God just doesn't. How can you believe that a man, a literal human being, was God? All the arguments in the world for the

resurrection stop short of making this acceptable. That just seems to be something out of pagan superstition. It's an utter contradiction! I know Christians hold to a Trinity, that part of God was down here while a part of God was up there, or something like that. But simply holding that Jesus was a faith healer, who somehow resuscitated, and whose followers (one in particular) then went overboard making claims about Him explains everything without requiring a belief in such impossible notions. (134-35)

What can we say to people like Mr. Boyd or some of the people in the video? What do Christians really believe about Jesus and do we have good reason for believing what we do?

Let's first set aside the notion that Jesus didn't exist. You run across this claim once in a while. A *Life* magazine article some years ago quoted the president of American Atheists: "There was no such person in the history of the world as Jesus Christ. ...Ever. [The Bible] is a fictional, nonhistorical narrative. The myth is good for business" (Jon Murray, in "Who Was He?" *Life*, December 1994, 66-82). We sometimes come across this view on websites or blogs. But no reputable scholars (or, hardly any), secular or Christian, believe Jesus was not a real historical person. Jesus is mentioned as a real person in several Jewish and Roman writings from the First and early Second Centuries. N. T. Wright, a prominent New Testament scholar from England, was called by the BBC and asked to go on one of their shows on Good Friday to debate the authors of a book titled *The Jesus Mysteries*. The book claimed that everything in the Gospels was borrowed from and so reflects much older pagan myths; that Jesus never existed; that the early church knew it was spreading a new version of an old myth; and that the later church covered this up in the interests of its own power and control. Wright said this was like asking a professional astronomer to debate the authors of a book claiming the moon was made of green cheese (http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Jesus_Self.htm, accessed 10/8/14). If you want to dig into this more, www.explorethegod.com has some good articles that answer some of these kinds of questions. But we don't need to take seriously the claim that Jesus never existed.

What can we say positively about who Jesus is, why Christians believe he is God, and why it matters?

Really to get at this question in the depth it deserves, we'd have to survey the whole Bible. But let's focus on this passage from John's Gospel. Of the four Gospels, John most obviously affirms that Jesus is God in the flesh. But the other three Gospels indicate his identity as well. They call Jesus "Lord," which translated God's name in the Greek version of the Old Testament. They affirm that Jesus is the Son of God. And they show Jesus doing and saying things that, from a Jewish perspective, only God does—like forgiving sins, making declarations based on his own authority, raising the dead, walking on water, etc. Next week we'll look at the reliability of the Bible and why we can believe what it tells us about Jesus.

John's Gospel begins telling the story of new creation by echoing the Bible's first creation story: "In the beginning." But John says that in the beginning "was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The Word here is God's self-expression, God's communication. It becomes clear as we read further that Jesus is the Word. The Word *was* God and yet there's some distinction—the Word was *with* God.

This Word is the agent of creation. There is life in him and that life is light for everyone. John the Baptist was a witness to the light. But Jesus is the true light that gives light to everyone. There's not a person who doesn't have something of God's light. We will finally be judged based on our response to the light we have.

The Word came into the world he had made, but he was not recognized. His own people did not receive him. But the people who did receive him also received the power or authority to become God's children—entering new creation by being born of God.

Verse 14 is a highlight: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." God's glorious presence was with Israel in the tabernacle and the temple. Now God, through the Word, tabernacles or pitches tent with us in Jesus Christ. Moses had asked to see God's glory—and he got a tiny glimpse of God's glorious presence.

Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness" (Exodus 34:5-6)

In Jesus, the Word made flesh, we see glory. It's the glory of the Son, sent from the Father. He is full of grace and truth or love and faithfulness. We receive abundant grace from him.

God told Moses that no one could look at God and live. John recalls that and says no one has seen God, but "the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known."

This whole first section of the Gospel affirms that Jesus is God's Word who is God and God's Son who is God. At the end of the Gospel, Jesus appears to his disciples after his resurrection. One of the disciples, Thomas, calls Jesus "My Lord and my God!" So John's Gospel begins and ends with these affirmations that Jesus is God. All through the Gospel are demonstrations of God's glory in Jesus through seven miraculous signs that he performs. There are also seven major declarations by Jesus that begin, "I am." That's the same phrase that was used when God revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush. Jesus claims the name of God for himself.

The apostle Paul was not the first to believe Jesus is divine. Earlier followers of Jesus had that belief. Paul does affirm it. Romans 9:5 refers to, "Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen." In Colossians 2:9 he says, "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form." Titus 2:13 says that "we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ."

Other New Testament passages affirm that Jesus is Lord and God. As the early church tried to figure that out, they developed the doctrine of the Trinity partly to explain how Jesus could be God in the flesh and yet still pray to God in heaven and then how we can experience God here and now. God is one, but God exists as a community of three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Probably the earliest Christian affirmation of faith or creed was the phrase "Jesus Christ is Lord." Jesus is the Messiah, but more, he is the Lord, the God of Israel and ruler of all. After the time of the New Testament, Christians worked to understand and explain what God did in Jesus. They developed summaries of Scripture or statements of Christian faith. The Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed tell the story of God and what he has done. The creed's three sections emphasize the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The section on Jesus is the longest, especially in the Nicene Creed, because dealing with Jesus' identity was the big issue for the church at that time.

The Apostles' Creed says,

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of the Father, and will come again to judge the living and the dead. (*The United Methodist Hymnal* #882)

The Nicene Creed starts this section saying, "For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven" (#880).

God, the eternal Son, came in Jesus to save us. That shows our need to be saved. And it shows how far God is willing to go to save us.

If it was not God who acted and suffered for us in Christ, then we with all our guilt and hope are left solely to our own devices, or rather left at the mercy of the principalities and powers of this human world. [If Jesus is not God with us, he can't really *save* us.] ...if in Jesus Christ God did not become completely human, did not really become one of us, then his salvation did not fully reach us; it shines (or dawns) ineffectively above our heads, instead of really affecting us right here where we live and suffer, right down here in the very midst of and over the whole range of our human life and destiny. [If Jesus is not

truly human, he can't save *us*; salvation doesn't reach us.] (Jan Milič Lochman, *The Faith We Confess* 104-05)

As I mentioned last week, Jesus makes all the difference. Who we believe Jesus is makes all the difference for us. We have the witness of Scripture telling us that God comes to us in Jesus Christ. We have the witness of the Church working out what that means. We have the witness of countless people who have found salvation, peace, life, integrity, love, joy, purpose, and so much more in Jesus. They tell us that they have come to know God in Jesus. When we put our faith in Jesus, we can have the witness of God's own Spirit that he is for real and we are his.

There have always been people who questioned Jesus or tried to downplay who he is and what he does. Some want to write him off as mistaken. Some see him as just the best of humanity, but not God. Some see him as only a prophet or teacher, but not also Savior and Lord. C. S. Lewis gave a classic response to those who want to see Jesus as less than he really is. It still resonates today.

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 the one thing we must not say. 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 a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill 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 open to us. He did not intend to. (*Mere Christianity*, Macmillan edition, 55-56)

What if every one of us did fall at Jesus' feet and claim him as Lord and God? What if every one of us decided to set our life's compass to Jesus' bearing? What kind of impact would we have on the world? Who's willing to give it a try?