

But Who Do You Say that I Am?

Introduction

The Text

¹⁸ Now it happened that as he was praying alone, the disciples were with him. And he asked them, “Who do the crowds say that I am?” ¹⁹ And they answered, “John the Baptist. But others say, Elijah, and others, that one of the prophets of old has risen.” ²⁰ Then he said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” And Peter answered, “The Christ of God.” (Luke 9:18–20)

But Who Do You Say that I Am?

- A. You recall from last time that questions have been swirling for chapters now in Luke’s gospel concerning the identity of this man, Jesus from Nazareth. Jesus has seemed satisfied up to this point to let the questions swirl without much clarification, even for His disciples.
1. But as we come now to this conversation here with His disciples, the issue has reached a crisis point and Jesus is no longer willing to let it stay in the realm of conjecture. He asks them first there in v. 18: “Who do the crowds say that I am?” And then, in a moment, He turns and presses this question in on them personally: “But who do you say that I am?” (v. 20a).
 - a. It is an arresting question. It is a question on which everything turns. Indeed, there is no more important question in all the universe that a human being could endeavor to answer. And it is a question that each one of us must answer for ourselves. “But who do you say that I am?” (v. 20a).
 - i. So it is this question that we shall give ourselves to considering here this morning.
- B. It seemed good to me to outline for us here the various options a person has when trying to answer this question for his/her self. Now I am not thinking here of those particular options held out by the crowds at the time of Jesus (answers which we looked at a bit last time).
1. Rather, I’m thinking of those options held out by the crowds in our day. Who do the crowds of this 21st century world say that Jesus is? Where do people fall on the issue and why?
 - a. In all of this, it is my great hope that, when all the facts have been considered (however briefly), the only real and reasonable option left for us will be to align our confession with Peter’s: “[You are] the Christ of God” (v. 20b).
- C. I think, at the bottom, we really have five basic options: (1) Legend; (2) Luminary; (3) Liar; (4) Lunatic; or (5) Lord. We’re going to deal with them one at a time.

Option #1: Legend

- A. What is meant by this first option is that either: (1) He didn't exist at all; or (2) if He did exist, the historical Jesus has been so embellished by His followers that it's as if He's hidden somewhere under all the myths and superstitions that have developed through the years. You can find Him under all of that, but you have to do a lot of peeling back of husks to get to the kernel of truth.

(1) Nonexistent

- A. On the first idea, really the most extreme of all, it should be said that virtually no respectable scholar goes so far as to say Jesus didn't exist at all. Biblical scholar F.F. Bruce notes: "Some writers may toy with the fancy of a 'Christ-myth,' but they do not do so on the ground of historical evidence. The historicity of Christ is as axiomatic for an unbiased historian as the historicity of Julius Caesar. It is not historians who propagate the 'Christ-myth' theories" (as quoted in NEDV, p. 120).
1. If you're a real historian you can't deny that Jesus existed. There's just too much there to support it.
- B. Interestingly, many extrabiblical, even non-Christian, sources reference Jesus—His life, death, and claimed resurrection—many of these coming out of the 1st and 2nd centuries AD.
1. Men like Roman historians Tacitus or Suetonius, or a governor in Asia Minor referred to as Pliny the Younger, or Jewish historian Josephus. None of these men had anything to gain in validating the historicity of Christ and that makes their testimony all the more credible.
 - a. That's why the Encyclopedia Britannica's article on Jesus, referring to these sorts of things, concludes: "These independent accounts prove that in ancient times even the opponents of Christianity never doubted the historicity of Jesus, which was disputed for the first time and on inadequate grounds by several authors at the end of the 18th, during the 19th, and at the beginning of the 20th centuries" (as quoted in NEDV, p. 135). In other words: this whole nonsense that Jesus didn't exist at all is a relatively modern phenomenon.
- C. Jesus of Nazareth, whatever else He was, certainly existed. He has simply exerted too much influence on the history of the world to be a complete and total fabrication.

(2) Embellished

- A. But we're not done dismissing this Legend bit quite yet are we? Often what we face in this regard is that less severe idea that the Jesus of history is so different from the Jesus who has been so embellished in the Bible.
- B. The narrative we're often told is that the early communities passed things down about Jesus by way of oral tradition and over time they embellished things—things about His supernatural power, about His claims of deity, about His fulfillment of OT prophecies, and certainly about His resurrection from the dead. They embellished in this way perhaps because they missed Him, perhaps because they were after some sort of a power grab.

1. But, whatever the case, when these stories finally got put into writing, what we have is no longer the historical Jesus.

C. But I'll give you three reasons why this simply can't be the case . . .

1. Fundamental Improbabilities

A. The idea that somehow Jesus was imagined into this divine being, embellished by His followers until, as generations passed, people actually started to believe it—we have to understand how improbable such an idea really is.

1. Jesus was Jewish. His disciples were all Jewish. The Jews, we must remember, were rigorously monotheistic, more so than any other people in history. By this, of course, I mean that they had it drilled into them from day one that there was only one God and there can be no other.

- a. Do you remember the very first commandment He gives them at Sinai? “² I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. ³ You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex 20:2–3).

- b. And, beyond this, every day the faithful Jew would recite what's known as the Shema, taken from Deut 6, that begins in v. 4 like this: “⁴ Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.”

- i. We could imagine, perhaps, the Romans dreaming up one of their men to be God. They virtually did this with their emperors.

(1) But, for the Jews, the idea was detestable. It is unthinkable that they would start calling a man God, unless He really showed Himself to be so.

B. Beyond all of this, Jesus was not the sort of Messiah they were expecting. They thought He would conquer, not be crucified. That's just not the sort of Christ they were expecting, and it's not the one that for quite some time it seems they even wanted.

1. Jesus is throughout the gospels having to push back on their false notions. Peter, at one point, even rebukes Him for this idea of the cross. So these men are not predisposed towards this idea at all.

- a. How/why, they would embellish this crucified peasant from Nazareth to be their Christ is beyond an answer . . . unless it's just the way things really went!

2. Early Composition

A. The simple reality is that the NT gospels and letters arise far too early, far too close to the events they are trying to embellish, to pull this sort of thing off. They are not written hundreds of years later, but within the lifetime of eyewitnesses.

- B. The earliest accounts of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ actually aren't found in the Gospels but in the letters of Paul, which every historian agrees were written just 15-20 years after the death of Jesus.
1. Consider 1 Cor 15:3-8: “³ For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures,⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.”
- C. Now what Paul is doing here is outrageously gutsy if this resurrection thing is a sham. He is invoking hundreds of eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection, which he emphasizes: “most of whom are still alive” (v. 6). Now why does he make note of that? He is inviting any reader of this public letter to go and test His claims.
1. Do you understand that? If you want to put an end to this nonsense, all you have to do is head into Jerusalem, interview a few of them, and if they all deny it, or their testimonies contradict, you could kill this Christianity thing before it ever gets out of the gate.
 - a. If you are trying to embellish history, if you are trying to massage the facts for your own ends, you've got to wait until all those who were actually there and can contradict you are dead. You don't invoke them and invite people to go talk to them . . . unless their testimony actually confirms what you claim.

3. Counterproductive Content

- A. One quick example of this is the fact that all four of the Gospels identify women as the first witnesses of the resurrection. “What's the big deal with that?” you ask.
1. Well, the testimony of women in ancient times all but disregarded. Their testimonies were considered inadmissible in both Roman and Jewish courts. Of course, this offends our 21st century sensibilities, but the fact is that women were seen as unreliable in Jesus' day.
- B. So the question we must face is: If you are trying to promote your fabrication, your legend, your lie to both Jewish and Gentile people in the 1st century, why on earth do you make women the first witnesses to the resurrection? It certainly doesn't give their cause any more credibility. In fact, it really could serve to undermine it. So why include that detail? Why not massage the facts a little bit?
1. The only reasonable answer is that they wrote it this way because it actually happened this way. They were convinced that the truth would in time commend itself. They didn't have to add to it, subtract from it, massage it. They could just record it and their God would vindicate their claims.
- C. It's because of these sorts of things and more that C.S. Lewis, a brilliant man who taught at both Oxford and Cambridge, would say this: “[A]s a literary historian, I am perfectly convinced that

whatever else the Gospels are they are not legends. I have read a great deal of legend and I am quite clear that they are not the same sort of thing” (God in the Dock).

Option #2: Luminary

- A. This is where the great majority of people, it seems to me, try to go. They can’t deny the historicity of the man, nor can they deny that there is much in His life and teaching to be admired, but seeing as they are unwilling to bend their knee to Him as Lord, they try to get away with merely honoring Him as a great Luminary.
1. He is, perhaps, the highest example of humanity, He is a great teacher, a great prophet, but He is nothing more.
- B. This is why someone like Gandhi would say: “I could accept Jesus as a martyr, and embodiment of sacrifice, and a divine teacher. His death on the cross was a great example to the world, but that there was anything like a mysterious or miraculous virtue in it, my heart could not accept” (An Autobiography). “He’s a good teacher, a good example, but that’s as far as I’ll go.”

Messiah or Megalomaniac?

- A. But, now, if we’ve sufficiently established that the Gospels are not Legends but accurate accounts of His own life and teaching, then, as we read them, we quickly ascertain that He can in no way be a mere Luminary, a good teacher of sorts. The option isn’t left open to us.
1. And this is precisely because of the grandiose nature of His own claims.
- B. John Stott elucidates this wonderfully in his little book *Basic Christianity*: “The most striking feature of the teaching of Jesus is that he was constantly talking about himself. . . . This self-centeredness of the teaching of Jesus immediately sets him apart from the other great religious teachers of the world. They were self-effacing. He was self-advancing. They pointed men away from themselves, saying, ‘That is the truth, so far as I perceive it; follow that.’ Jesus said, ‘I am the truth, follow me.’ The founder of none of the ethnic religions ever dared to say such a thing. The personal pronoun forces itself repeatedly on our attention as we read his words. For example: ‘I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst.’ ‘I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.’ ‘I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.’ ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me’” (pp. 29-30).
1. After going on like this for pages, Stott comes out and concludes: “We cannot any longer regard Jesus as simply a great teacher if he was completely mistaken in one of the chief subjects of his teaching—himself. There is a certain disturbing ‘megalomania’ about Jesus which many scholars have recognized” (p. 42).

The Trilemma

- A. All of this leads us now to what has become known as the trilemma, described most memorably for us by C.S. Lewis in his classic *Mere Christianity*: “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 the 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" (p. 52).

- B. So there you have it. If He's not a Legend and He cannot be merely a Luminary, then He must either be a Liar, a Lunatic, or the Lord of all!

Option #3: Liar

- A. This option would say that all those claims He makes about Himself are from malice—He simply deceived these people into believing He was something more, something He was not.
- B. But against this, I shall just put forward one quick argument . . .

The Quality of His Character

- A. Even those who reject Jesus' claims cannot deny the absolute moral perfection He presents us with.
 - 1. Historian and skeptic/unbeliever William Lecky wrote this in his *History of European Morals*: "[The character of Jesus] has not only been the highest pattern of virtue, but the strongest incentive to its practice, and has exerted so deep an influence, that it may be truly said, that the simple record of three short years of active life has done more to regenerate and to soften mankind, than all the disquisitions of philosophers and than all the exhortations of moralists."
- B. You simply cannot deny the moral integrity of this Man's life. When you see Him, you are immediately struck by it. Such a thing is recounted time and again, not just in the writings of men throughout history, but in the Gospel records themselves.
 - 1. Do you remember when He was bound and brought before the Sanhedrin? Matthew tells us that "⁵⁹ the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death, ⁶⁰ but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward" (Matt 26:59–60). And when at last they found something that might stick, even then Mark tells us the people couldn't get their story straight (Mark 14:59).
 - 2. And when Jesus is then delivered to Pilate, while the chief priests and the elders are hurling accusations at Him, Jesus gives no defense for Himself. And we're told that Pilate "was greatly amazed" (Matt 27:14). And we read later that he is convinced of Jesus' innocence: "[W]hat evil has he done" (Matt 27:23). Even Pilate's own wife sends word to him from her chamber: "Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream" (Matt 27:19). John tells us that he "sought to release him" (John 19:12), but the Jews would not have it.

3. So they take Him to be crucified. And as He hangs there, while most are mocking, and spitting, and gambling for His garments, there is one man, a criminal hanging on a cross next to Him, who sees. And he cries out in protest: “[T]his man has done nothing wrong” (Luke 23:41b).
 4. And as Jesus breathes His last, a great many more come to this very same conclusion. The centurion, a Roman officer who would have been in charge of this whole affair, seeing the manner in which Jesus dies confesses: “Certainly this man was innocent!” (Luke 23:47). And then Luke tells us that “all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts” (Luke 23:48). “What have we done?!”
- C. The quality of His character was and is uncontestable, undeniable, irrefutable. He is not a liar. He is the righteousness of God. He is my righteousness! “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21).

Option #4: Lunatic

- A. Here we come to the next possibility, although, now having already established the quality of His character, it should seem a near impossibility. Perhaps He’s a Lunatic.
1. O He believed He was the Son of God all right, He believed it enough to die for it. But all this proves is the sad fact that He was crazy. Like the men you see uttering things on the side of the road, talking to people no one sees, using words which no one in their right mind can even understand.
- B. But does such a portrait fit this Man from Nazareth? Against this we might put forward evidence from yet another angle . . .

The Soundness of His Mind

- A. There is a reason people, though they want to disregard Him as Lord, still feel they must at least honor Him as Luminary. And it is because of this: the soundness of His mind. The wisdom of His teaching and life cannot be denied.
1. As psychiatrist J.T. Fisher asserts: “If you were to take the sum total of all authoritative articles ever written by the most qualified of psychologists and psychiatrists on the subject of mental hygiene--if you were to combine them and refine them and cleave out the excess verbiage--if you were to take the whole of the meat and none of the parsley, and if you were to have these unadulterated bits of pure scientific knowledge concisely expressed by the most capable of living poets, you would have an awkward and incomplete summation of the Sermon on the Mount. And it would suffer immeasurably through comparison. For nearly two thousand years the Christian world has been holding in its hands the complete answer to its restless and fruitless yearnings. Here ... rests the blueprint for successful human life with optimum mental health and contentment” (A Few Buttons Missing).

Option #5: Lord

- A. So if Jesus is not a Legend, and we understand that the NT speaks of Him accurately; if He is not a mere Luminary due to the grandiose and exclusive nature of His claims; if He is not a Liar as evidenced by the exemplary quality of His character; if He is not a Lunatic as made plain by the soundness of His mind; what then are we left with?
1. Well, we are left to take Him at His word. We are left to receive Him as He is given to us in the NT—that He lived a sinless life, died a sinner’s death, and rose again from the dead whereby God has made Him Savior and Lord of all!
 - a. “[I]f you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom 10:9).
- B. So now we must face the mounting pressure of that question we asked at the front: “But who do you say that I am?” (Luke 9:20a). Enough with the discussion of what others are saying about Him. Eventually, it must come down to this deeply personal level.
1. Every person who ever lived will have to stand before almighty God and give an account for this answer for themselves. Grandma’s confession will not shelter you. Daddy’s faith will not save you. “But who do you say that I am?” At the bottom, it is you who must wrestle with this question.
- C. And I hope I have sufficiently made the case here today. He is not a Legend. He is not a mere Luminary. He is not a Liar. He is not a Lunatic. He is the Lord!
1. The only thing left to ask, then, is: If He is the Lord, is He your Lord?!