



THE DIVINITY OF CHRIST

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“[T]hey [the early Christian] were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god...”

- Pliny the Younger to the Roman Emperor Trajan, c. 112 AD

“My lord and my God!”

- John 20:28

“We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God, begotten not made, one in Being with the Father.”

- Nicene Creed

The Importance of the Question

The question as to who exactly Jesus of Nazareth was is the most important question a person can ask himself. Whether or not Jesus is divine (i.e., whether or not He is God incarnate) is absolutely essential to Christianity. One cannot be a Catholic and at the same time deny the divinity of Christ. Consider the implications of the issue:

- ❖ The divinity of Christ is the most distinctively Christian doctrine of all, the likes of which are found in no other religion.
- ❖ This issue defines the essential difference between orthodox, traditional, biblical, historical, creedal Christianity and revisionist, modernist, liberal Christianity.
- ❖ This doctrine is the key to all the other doctrines of Christianity. Without it, nothing else matters and no other doctrines would make sense.
- ❖ If Christ is divine, then his coming to earth is undoubtedly the most important event in history.
- ❖ If Christ is divine, our absolute obligation is to believe everything he says and obey everything he commands.

What exactly do we assert when we mean that Jesus Christ is “divine?”

Here it is important to explain what we mean by asserting the Divinity of Christ,¹ for the term is a great matter of confusion. For example, many other religions assert that Christ was “divine.” Islam, for example, teaches that Jesus was indeed virginally conceived and that he was the

¹ There will be a more in depth treatment of this in our class on the Incarnation & Redemption.

Messiah and divine. However, they do not accept that He is the Son of God or that He is the Second Person of the Trinity. Buddhists and eastern mystics often consider Jesus “divine”, but they would assert that His divinity is no different from the “divine spark” in all of us; i.e., Jesus is no different than you or I and you or I could become just as “divine” as Him if we asserted ourselves. Then there are the pseudo-Christian groups like the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Mormons, who claim that Jesus is “divine” but (in the first case) is only an angel or (in the case of the Mormons) He is one of many gods and lesser than God the Father. So you see, just because a group claims to accept Jesus’ divinity in no way means they hold the true and Catholic position on the matter.

(For the record, many other mainline Christian groups accept the Catholic doctrine of Christ’s divinity as formulated at the Councils of Nicaea, Chalcedon and Ephesus. Lutherans, Anglicans, Presbyterians and most other Protestant groups accept the divinity of Christ.)

To say that Christ is divine is to assert the following statement: *Jesus Christ, though a man in history, was also fully God, God come to earth, the eternal Word made flesh.* He is not less than God the Father or the Holy Spirit but is co-equal with them both in power, glory and eternity. As the Nicene Creed says, He is “God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father.” He is not a holy man, nor an inspired prophet, nor a sort of lesser god: He is God Himself, the Creator of the Universe, come to earth by assuming human nature.

“We believe and confess that Jesus of Nazareth, born a Jew of a daughter of Israel at Bethlehem at the time of King Herod the Great and the emperor Caesar Augustus, a carpenter by trade, who died crucified in Jerusalem under the procurator Pontius Pilate during the reign of the emperor Tiberius, is the eternal Son of God made man. He ‘came from God’, ‘descended from heaven’, and ‘came in the flesh’. For ‘the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. . . and from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace.’”

-CCC 423

First Problem: Is Christ a Historical Person?

Obviously, before one can prove Christ was divine, one must prove that He actually existed. Almost everybody acknowledges the plain fact that Jesus Christ really existed, but as there are a few who do not, it is good to go over the facts.

Many instances of the historical existence of Christ are attested to outside of the Gospels. Are few noteworthy ones are:

Cornelius Tacitus (55-120 AD), "the greatest historian" of ancient Rome:

"Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the

extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome..." -Tacitus, *Annals*, 15:44

Lucian (Greek writer and rhetorician, circa 120-after 180)

"The Christians, you know, worship a man to this day the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account. . . . " -Lucian, *The Death of Peregrine*

The Talmud (c. 70 – 200 AD)

"On the eve of the Passover Yeshu was hanged... before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, "He is going forth to be stoned because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy. Anyone who can say anything in his favor, let him come forward and plead on his behalf." But since nothing was brought forward in his favor he was hanged on the eve of the Passover!" -Babylonian Talmud, I Epstein Translation, vol. III

These are a few of the extra-biblical accounts that refer to Christ. This should be sufficient evidence to refute those who claim that He never existed or was simply a mythological character.

Second Problem: Can the Divinity of Christ be proven?

So, we have discounted the theory that Christ is a myth. This leaves us to establish the divinity of Christ, as defined by the Nicene Creed. The divinity of Christ, like the Holy Trinity, is a doctrine given to us by Divine Revelation and as such requires the assent of faith to reason. However, the words, deeds and circumstances of Christ's life render it very reasonable to come to conclusion of His divinity. Many atheists have come to faith in Christ simply by studying the different theories regarding His divinity and seeing it as the only logical alternative.

The question of what to make of Christ's personal identity can be summed up in three options; this leaves us with what has been called "the Trilemma." The Trilemma is set up this way:

- Jesus made certain claims about Himself which nobody but God could make.
- Besides simply making claims, Jesus performs many supernatural works that give credibility to His claims, including the supreme miracle of His bodily Resurrection.
- What is a person to make of these claims? There are only three plausible answers: Jesus is either a Lunatic, a Liar, or He is telling the truth and is therefore Lord. Lord, Liar or Lunatic?

Was Jesus a lunatic?

Jesus does not display any signs of lunacy. He acts with deliberateness, reason and demonstrates an extraordinarily sharp intellect, especially in His intellectual sparring matches with the scribes

and Pharisees. He is fully in control of all His faculties and does everything He does quite intentionally without any signs of lunacy. In other words, He has the wrong psychological profile to be considered a lunatic. It is unlikely that a lunatic would be able to compose such beautiful and memorable sayings as the Lord's Prayer, the Beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount, the parables of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan as well as the Golden Rule.

"The size of the gap between what you are and what you think you are is a pretty good index of your insanity. If I believe I am the best writer in America, I may be an egotistical fool, but I am not insane. If I believe I am Napoleon, I am probably near the edge. If I believe I am the archangel Gabriel, I am probably well over it. And if I believe I am God?...Would you send your children to Sunday school to be taught by a man who thought he was God?"

-Handbook of Christian Apologetics, Kreeft & Tacelli, p. 155

Could He have been lying?

The main argument against the possibility of Christ being a liar is His eminent trustworthiness. Everyone who reads the Gospels agrees that Jesus was a good and wise man, a great and profound teacher. Most nonreligious people, and even many people of other religions, like Gandhi, see him as history's greatest moral teacher. He is, in short, eminently trustworthy. His good deeds, His powerful preaching on morality and obedience to God, His profound humility and His self-sacrifice all make the possibility of Him being a liar, especially on such an important topic as His divinity, very unlikely.

However, the fact that it is unlikely does not mean it is not possible; many otherwise good people get caught in lies all of the time. Why is this situation any different?

- Nobody willingly dies for what they *know* to be a lie, especially the death of crucifixion.
- Jesus maintained His claims to the very end, even on the threshold of death.
- It is out of keeping with everything else we know about Jesus.

"Everybody agrees that Jesus is a trustworthy teacher. "But what a trustworthy teacher teaches can be trusted. If he is trustworthy, then we should trust him, especially about his own identity. If we do not trust him about that, then we cannot say that he is trustworthy, that is, wise and good. In fact, if we do not trust him even to know who he is, then he certainly is not trustworthy, wise and good. If there is any one thing that disqualifies a person from being trustworthy, it is not knowing himself. A man who thinks he is God when he is not God clearly does not know himself!"

-Handbook of Christian Apologetics, Kreeft & Tacelli, p. 155

The "Guru" Argument

Besides the theories that Jesus was lying or was insane, a new theory is becoming popular (especially among New Age groups) that claims that Jesus' words are to be interpreted as those of an Eastern guru and spiritualized. In this theory, everything Jesus said was true, but it is we

who have misunderstood Him for two thousand years. Yes, Jesus was God, and knew it, and claimed it – but we are all God. Jesus came not as a unique God-Man sent to redeem us by His sacrificial death, but as an enlightened guru who came to show us that we are all god-men and we just need to realize it through introspection and enlightenment. This position is refuted by several arguments:

- Christ was immersed in the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament. All His preaching is drawn from Old Testament themes and the whole world-view of the Jewish people was based upon the Old Testament, which as anyone who has ever read it knows, is totally opposed to the kind of New Age mysticism espoused by the Eastern religions. Jesus and Judaism of the 1st century knew nothing of that type of mystical jargon.
- Any sincere exegete of the texts of the New Testament will acknowledge that such meanings can only be read into the text by a considerable stretch of the imagination. The Greek and Aramaic words used by Christ and the Apostles do not lend themselves to that type of interpretation.
- Nowhere in Christian history until recently (since 1900) has anybody ever interpreted Christ's words that way. Even the Gnostics acknowledged that Christ was a unique, divine being.

The Only Alternative- “Jesus Christ is Lord, to the Glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:11)

This leaves us with one alternative: if Jesus Christ really existed, and He is not a liar or a lunatic, and furthermore, if His words cannot be interpreted in a New Age context, then the only alternative left to us is that He was telling the complete truth about who He was and deserves our complete obedience.

If He is Lord, then several things follow:

- Every word He says is truth.
- We must give obedience to all of His moral commands.
- We must take very seriously the teachings of those appointed by Him, of whom He said “He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects Me, and he who rejects Me rejects Him who sent Me” (Luke 10:16). What we do with Christ determines our relationship to God.

“Therefore, the Sacred Council teaches that bishops by divine institution have succeeded to the place of the apostles, as shepherds of the Church, and he who hears them, hears Christ, and he who rejects them, rejects Christ and Him who sent Christ.”

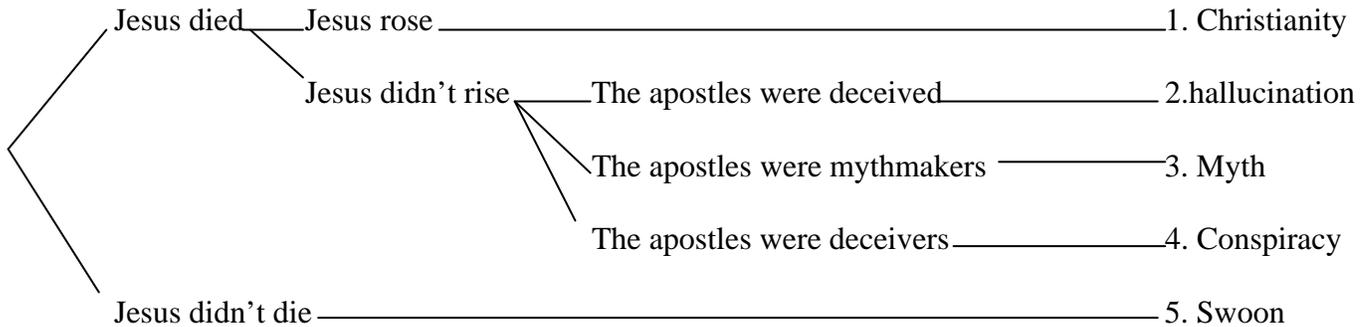
- Vatican II Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* XX

The divinity and authority of Christ are the source of all the doctrines the Church proclaims as revealed and all the authority she claims for herself.

The Ultimate Vindication of Christ's Claims: The Resurrection

The Strategy of the Argument for the Resurrection: Five Possible Theories

“We believe Christ’s resurrection can be proved with at least as much certainty as any universally believed and well-documented event in ancient history” (HCA, 181).



“Either (1) the resurrection really happened, (2) the apostles were deceived by a hallucination, (3) the apostles created a myth, not meaning it literally, (4) the apostles were deceivers who conspired to foist on the world the most famous and successful lie in history, or (5) Jesus only swooned and was resuscitated, not resurrected” (HCA, 182).

Refutation of the Swoon Theory

1. Jesus could not have survived crucifixion. Period.
2. His legs were not broken (the soldiers *knew* he was dead).
3. John saw blood and water flow from his pierced heart. This shows that Jesus’ lungs had collapsed and he had died of asphyxiation. Any medical expert can vouch for this.
4. His appearances convinced the disciples that he was gloriously alive. A half-dead, staggering sick man who has just had a narrow escape is not worshipped fearlessly as divine Lord and conqueror of death.
5. A swooning corpse could not have overpowered the Roman guards.
6. A swooning half-dead man could not have moved the stone.
7. Most simply, the swoon theory necessarily turns into the conspiracy theory or the hallucination theory, for the disciples testified that Jesus did not swoon but really died and really rose.

Refutation of the Conspiracy Theory

1. The human heart is singularly susceptible to fickleness, to change, to promises, to bribery. One of them had only to deny his story under these inducements, or still more because of possible imprisonment, tortures and death, and they would all have been lost. (Pascal)
2. If they made up the story, they were the most creative, clever, intelligent fantasists in history. Fishermen’s “fish stories” are never that elaborate, that convincing, that life changing, and that enduring.

3. They willingly died for their “conspiracy.” Nothing proves sincerity like martyrdom.
4. There could be no possible motive for such a lie. Lies are always told for some selfish advantage. What advantage did the “conspirators” derive from their “lie”? They were hated, scorned, excommunicated, imprisoned, tortured, exiled, crucified, boiled alive, roasted, beheaded, disemboweled and fed to lions – hardly a catalog of perks!
5. If it was a lie, the Jews would have produced the corpse and ended the claims to the Resurrection.

Refutation of the Hallucination Theory

1. There were too many witnesses.
2. The witnesses were qualified.
3. Five hundred saw Christ together (1 Cor. 15:3-8).
4. Hallucinations last a few seconds, not forty days.
5. Hallucinations usually happen only once, except to the insane.
6. Thomas didn’t even believe it (he was skeptical, then convinced otherwise).
7. The apostles could not have believed in the “hallucination” if Jesus’ corpse had still been in the tomb. They would have checked for it; if it was there, they could not have believed.
8. The Jews would have stopped their hallucinogenic story by producing the body.
9. A hallucination would explain only the post-resurrection appearances; it would not explain the empty tomb, the rolled away stone, or the inability to produce the corpse. No theory explains all these data except the real resurrection.

Refutation of the Myth Theory

1. The style of the Gospel is radically different from mythical literature.
2. No time for the myth to develop.
3. The first witnesses of the resurrection were women.

Scripture explicitly states that it is not myth (2 Pet. 1:16), so either it is not, or we are back in the conspiracy theory.

Some Scriptural Data for Christ’s Claim to Divinity

1. The early credal formula “Jesus is Lord”: 1 Cor 12:3; Phil 2:11.
Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:5-11).
2. The title “Son of God”: Mt 11:27; Mk 12:6; 13:32; 14:61-62; Lk 10:22; 22:70; Jn 10:30; 14:9.
3. The New Testament calls him “God”: Tit 2:13; 1 Jn 5:20; Rom 9:5; Jn 1:1.

4. Absolutely, universally supreme: Col 1:15-20.
5. Eternally preexistent: Jn 1:1; Phil 2:6; Heb 13:8; Rev 22:13.
6. Omnipresent: Mt 18:20; 28:20.
7. Omnipotent: Mt 28:18; Heb 1:3; Rev 1:8.
8. Immutable: Heb 1:11-12; 13:8.
9. Creates: Col 1:16-17; Jn 1:3; 1 Cor 8:6; Heb 1:10.
10. Sinless, perfect: Heb 7:26; Jn 8:46; 2 Cor 5:21.
11. Has authority to forgive sins: Mk 2:5-12; Lk 24:45-47; Acts 10:43; 1 Jn 1:5-9.
12. Rightly worshipped: Mt 2:11; 14:33; 28:9; Jn 20:28; Heb 1:5-9.
13. Speaks the unique, forbidden divine name in reference to Himself. Jn 8:58-59
Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." So they took up stones to throw at him; but Jesus hid himself, and went out of the temple.
14. Called "King of kings and Lord of lords": 1 Tim 6:15; Rev 17:14.
15. One with the Father: Jn 10:30; 12:45; 14:8-10.
16. Performs miracles: Jn 10:37-38; and throughout all four Gospels.
17. Sends the Holy Spirit: Jn 14:25-26; 16:7-15.
18. The Father testifies to him: Mt 3:17; 17:5; Jn 8:18; 1 Jn 5:9.
19. Gives eternal life: Jn 3:16; 5:39-40; 20:30-31.
20. Foreknows the future: Mk 8:31; Lk 9:21-22; 12:49-53; 22:35-37; 24:1-7; Jn 3:11-14;
6:63-64; 13:1-11; 14:27-29; 18:1-4; 19:26-30.
21. Is Lord over the Law: Lk 6:1-5.

Conclusions

"What terrible fate awaits [the modernists] if they follow the multifarious and weighty evidence and argument that naturally emerges from the data, as we have summarized it here in this chapter?...The answer is not obscure: traditional Christianity awaits them, complete with adoration of Christ as God, obedience to Christ as Lord, dependence on Christ as Savior, humble confession of sin and a serious effort to live Christ's life of self-sacrifice, detachment from the world, righteousness, holiness and purity of thought, word and deed. The historical evidence is massive enough to convince the open-minded inquirer. By analogy with any other historical event, the resurrection has eminently credible evidence behind it. To disbelieve it, you must deliberately make an exception to the rules you use everywhere else in history. Now why would someone want to do that? Ask yourself that question if you dare, and take an honest look into your heart before you answer"

– *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, Kreeft & Tacelli, p 197

For Further Reading: *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, Kreeft & Tacelli, ch. 7; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §456-478; *Philippians* 2:5-11; *Lumen Gentium* ch. 3 (1964); C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*