

Did the Apostles Believe Jesus is God?

Jesus of Nazareth spent his first thirty years in relative obscurity, working as an unheralded carpenter in a small village of Palestine. But in the following three years he uttered words that astounded all who heard them, words that ultimately changed our world. He also performed feats no other person has, calming storms, healing diseases, restoring sight, and even raising the dead.

But the greatest difference between Jesus Christ and all other religious leaders is that, according to Christians, he claimed to be God (See, "Did Jesus Claim to be God?" at <http://y-jesus.com/more/jcg-jesus-claim-god>) . If this claim of his is false, the message of the gospel loses all credibility. That message is that God loved us so much that He became a man to die for our sins, offering us eternal life with Himself. Thus, if Jesus is not God, then we have been lied to.

Some religions teach that Jesus was a created being. And books, like The Da Vinci Code, have become best-sellers by saying neither Jesus nor his apostles taught that he is God (See "Mona Lisa's Smirk" at <http://y-jesus.com/wwrj/2-da-vinci-conspiracy>).

These attacks on the divinity of Christ raise the question of what happened nearly 2000 years ago that caused Christianity to claim that its founder, Jesus Christ, is actually God. In "Did Jesus Claim to be God" (see <http://y-jesus.com/more/jcg-jesus-claim-god>) we see that the evidence from the New Testament points strongly to the fact that Jesus did claim to be God. But were the eyewitnesses, who heard Jesus' words and saw his miraculous deeds, convinced that he is equal in every way with his Father? Or did they think that Jesus was merely a higher created being or a great prophet like Moses?

To sort out truth from fiction, we need to go back to the words of the apostles who were there when Jesus walked the earth, and wrote their testimonies of what they saw and heard.

The Eyewitnesses

Jesus had picked very ordinary men to be his followers. He spent three years with them, teaching them about himself and explaining to them the deep truths of God's Word. During those three years, Jesus performed numerous miracles, made audacious claims, and lived an absolutely righteous life. Later, these apostles wrote down many of Jesus' words and deeds. These New Testament accounts have been called extremely reliable, far exceeding all other ancient historical documents for authenticity (See <http://y-jesus.com/wwrj/4-are-gospels-true>).

Scholars have noted that the New Testament reveals an objectivity that makes the apostles' accounts about Jesus totally believable. They honestly reported what they saw and heard. Historian Will Durant remarks:

"These men were hardly of the type that one would have chosen to remodel the world. The Gospels realistically differentiate their characters, and honestly expose their faults." [1]

When they first encountered Jesus, the apostles had no idea who he was. However, as they heard his profound words and saw him restore sight to the blind and raise the dead, they may have recalled the prophecies indicating the Messiah would be God Himself. (Isaiah 9:6; Micah 5:2). But as they saw him dying on the cross, Jesus appeared defeated and powerless. Any thoughts they might have had that Jesus was God undoubtedly vanished at the cross.

However, three days after that traumatic event, the one, who had appeared impotent while hanging on the cross,miraculously appeared alive to his followers. (See <http://y-jesus.com/wwrj/6-jesus-rise-dead/>)

And he had risen bodily. They saw him, touched him, ate with him, and heard him talk of his glorified position as the supreme authority in the universe. Simon Peter, who was one of the closest of Jesus' disciples, and an eyewitness, wrote:

"We saw it with our own eyes: Jesus resplendent with light from God the Father....We couldn't be more sure of what we saw and heard—God's glory, God's voice." (2 Peter 1: 16, 17 The Message)

But does the fact that the apostles saw God's glory and heard God's voice through Jesus mean that they regarded him as God? New Testament scholar A. H. McNeile gives us the answer:

"...no sooner had the Life of Jesus ended in apparent failure and shame than the great body of Christians—not an individual here and there, but the mass of the Church—passed over at once to the fixed belief that He was God."[2]

So, did the apostles who wrote the New Testament accounts really believe that Jesus is God, or did they regard him as a created being? If they regarded Jesus as God, did they consider him as the Creator of the universe, or something less? Those who deny Jesus' deity say that the apostles taught that Jesus is God's supreme creation, and that the Father alone is the eternal God. So, to clarify their beliefs about Jesus, we will examine their words, asking three questions:

1. Did the apostles and early Christians worship and pray to Jesus as Lord?
2. Did the apostles teach that Jesus is the Creator written of in Genesis?
3. Did the apostles worship Jesus as Preeminent in the universe?

Lord

After Jesus ascended, the apostles stunned both Jew and Roman by proclaiming Jesus as "Lord".[3] And the apostles did the unthinkable and worshipped Jesus, even praying to him as if he was God. Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" as he was being stoned to death. (Acts 7:59).

Other believers soon joined Stephen, who even in the face of death, "never ceased for a single day...to teach and to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus (Acts 5:42). The apostles, most of whom were martyred, passed on their knowledge of Jesus to church fathers who carried on their message into the next generation.

Ignatius, a disciple of the Apostle John, wrote about Jesus' 2nd coming, "Look for him that is above the times, him who has not times, him who is invisible". In a letter to Polycarp he states "Jesus is God", "God incarnate," and to the Ephesians he writes, "... God Himself appearing in the form of a man, for the renewal of eternal life." (Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians 4:13)

Clement of Rome in 96 A. D. also taught Jesus' divinity, saying, "We ought to think of Jesus Christ as of God." (2nd Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians 1:1)

Polycarp, also a pupil of John's, was tried before the Roman proconsul for worshipping Jesus as Lord. While the frenzied crowd shouted for his blood, the Roman judge demanded he proclaim Caesar as Lord. But Polycarp went to the stake, rather than renounce Jesus as his Lord, responding,

"Eighty-six years I have served Christ, and He never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"[4]

As the early church grew, Gnostics and other cults began teaching that Jesus was a created being, inferior to the Father. This came to a head in the fourth century when Arius, a popular preacher from Libya, persuaded many leaders that Jesus wasn't fully God. Then in 325 A. D. at the Council of Nicaea (see <http://y-jesus.com/more/ggh-gnostic-gospels/>) church leaders met to resolve the issue of whether Jesus is the Creator, or merely a creation.[5] These church leaders overwhelmingly affirmed the long-held Christian conviction and New Testament teaching that Jesus is fully God.[6]

Creator

In Genesis the God of the Bible is revealed as Creator of everything from the tiny atom to the magnitude of space with its billions of galaxies. Thus, it would have been heresy for a Jew to think an angel or any other created being was the Creator. Isaiah confirms that God (Yahweh) is the Creator:

"This is what the Lord, the Creator and Holy One of Israel says...I am the one who made the earth and created people to live on it. With my hands I stretched out the heavens. All the millions of stars are at my command....I, the LORD Almighty, have spoken!" (Isaiah 45:11a, 12, 13b)

So, did the apostles view Jesus as part of creation, or as the Creator?"

John's Testimony

When Jesus' disciples gazed at the stars on dark evenings, they most likely didn't even dream that the Creator of those stars might be in their very presence. Yet after his resurrection, they saw Jesus with new eyes. And before he left earth, Jesus began to unfold mysteries to them about his identity.

Recalling his Lord's words, John begins his gospel by revealing who Jesus is:

"In the beginning the Word (logos) already existed. He was with God, and he was God....He created everything there is. Nothing exists that he didn't make. Life itself was in him and this life gives light to everyone." (John 1:1, 3-4)

Although scientists now believe the universe had a beginning from nothing, they can't tell us who was there to start it all. John reveals that before creation, "the Word already existed", and was "with God."

So who or what is this pre-existent Word? John's next words clarify who he is talking about: "the Word was God.[7]

As a Jew, John believed in one God. But John is talking about two entities here, God and the Word. Jehovah's Witnesses, who teach that Jesus was created, erroneously translate this passage to mean the Word is a god rather than the God. But New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce writes that "rendering the phrase as "a god" is a frightful mistranslation because the omission of the indefinite article is common with nouns in the predicative construction.[8]

Therefore, John, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, tells us:

1. the "Word" existed before creation
2. the "Word" is the Creator who created everything
3. the "Word" is God

Thus far, John has told us that the Word is eternal, Created everything, and is God. But he doesn't tell us whether the Word is a force or a person until verse 14.

"So the Word became human and lived here on earth among us." He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the only Son of the Father" (John 1:14).

John clearly refers here to Jesus. Furthermore, in his epistle he confirms it:

"The one who existed from the beginning is the one we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is Jesus Christ, the Word of life" (1 John 1:1).

John tells us that “nothing exists that he didn’t make.” If nothing existed apart from him, it follows that Jesus couldn’t have been a created being. And according to John, the Word (Jesus) is God.

Paul’s Testimony

Unlike John, the apostle Paul, (formerly Saul) was a bitter opponent and persecutor of Christians, until Jesus revealed himself to him in a vision. Years later, Paul reveals to the Colossians what he had learned of Jesus’ identity:

“He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of creation. For by Him all things were created...all things have been created by Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together”
(Col. 1:15-17 NASB).

Paul reveals several important things in this passage:

1. Jesus is the exact image of God
2. Jesus is the “first-born” of creation
3. Jesus created everything
4. Jesus is the reason for creation
5. Jesus existed before everything
6. Jesus holds creation together

What does “exact image of God” mean? Bruce remarks: “To call Christ the image of God is to say that in Him the being and nature of God have been perfectly manifested—that in Him the invisible has become visible.[9] Thus, God being visible in Christ coincides with Jesus’ own words to Philip, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

In verse 15, the Greek word for “first-born” (prototokos) means “supreme” rather than in the temporal sense of ‘born after.’[10] According to Bruce, Paul is referring to “Christ’s pre-existence and cosmic activity in creation, and “denotes not only Jesus’ priority but also his primacy.”[11] What makes this clear is verse 16 which tells us that everything in the universe was created both through Jesus Christ, and also for him.

In verse 17 we see the eternal Christ sustaining creation. According to Paul, every atom, each DNA strand, and all the billions of galaxies are held together by the power of Jesus Christ. Thus, Jesus is the one from whom everything originated, the one for whom it was created, and the one that holds it all together.

Hebrews’ Testimony

The New Testament book of Hebrews[12] also reveals Jesus as the Creator of everything. Its opening passage reflects Paul’s words to the Colossians:

“Long ago God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets. But now in these final days, he has spoken to us through his Son. God promised everything to the Son as an inheritance, and through the Son he made the universe and everything in it. The Son reflects God’s own glory, and everything about him represents God exactly. He sustains the universe by the mighty power of his command” (Heb. 1:1-3a)

Just as John and Paul reveal, the author of Hebrews tells us that prior to Jesus becoming a man, God created the universe through him. And Hebrews also reveals Jesus Christ as the one who sustains it.

Verse 3 speaks of Jesus as the “perfect imprint and very image of God’s nature.”[13] The Greek word here means that “the Son is the effulgence, the out-raying of the glory of God’s glory.”[14] This statement, that Jesus

is the “perfect imprint” of the infinite God, confirms that the apostles believed Jesus is fully God.

The author of Hebrews then goes on to tell us that Jesus is not only superior to the prophets, but he also is far above the angels.

“This shows that God’s Son is far greater than the angels, just as the name God gave him is far greater than their names” (Heb. 1:4).

John Piper explains why Jesus is vastly superior to angels:

“No angel in heaven ever received such honor and affection as the Son has received from all eternity from his Father. As great and wonderful as angels are, they do not rival the Son.....The Son of God is not an angel—not even the highest archangel. Rather God says, ‘Let God’s angels worship him!’” (Hebrews 1:6). The Son of God is worthy of all the worship that the hosts of heaven can give—not to mention ours.”[15]

The author of Hebrews then discloses the deity of Jesus:

“But as to the Son, He [the Father] says to Him, ‘Your throne, O God, is forever and ever....’” (Heb. 1:8 Ampl.)

Later in Hebrews, we learn that Jesus Christ “is the same yesterday, today, and forever,” a clear statement of his eternal Deity (Heb. 13:8). A created being is not the same today as yesterday because there would have been a time when he didn’t exist. It would be difficult to construe these passages in Hebrews to mean anything other than the fact that Jesus is the God spoken of in the Old Testament, who along with His Father and the Holy Spirit, created the universe.

The apostles must have been appalled to learn that the one they had seen bleed and hang suspended on a Roman cross is the very One who created the tree it was made from as well as the men who nailed him to it.

Preeminent One

The early Christians were accused by the Romans of stealing glory from Caesar, and by the Jews of robbing glory from God (Yahweh). Christianity is criticized by some as being “too Jesus focused.” But is that what the apostles thought? Let’s hear again from Paul as he writes to the Colossians about Jesus.

“He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Col. 1:19 ESV).

Paul writes that God is pleased to have Jesus as the preeminent person in the universe. But the Old Testament clearly teaches that God will never relinquish his preeminence to a created being (Deut. 6:4, 5; Ps. 83:18; Prov. 16:4; Is. 42:11). Isaiah speaks clearly of God’s (Yahweh’s) preeminence.

“Let all the world look to me for salvation! For I am God; there is no other. I have sworn by my own name, and I will never go back on my word: Every knee will bow to me, and every tongue will confess allegiance to my name.” (Isaiah 45:22, 23 NLT)

But how can both Jesus and Yahweh be preeminent? There may be a clue in Genesis, where the Hebrew word used for God the Creator is plural (Elohim). And, when Isaiah states that God alone created everything, the Hebrew word for God (Yahweh) is also plural. Dr. Norman Geisler concludes, “Biblically speaking, there is more

than enough evidence to conclude that the fundamental nature of God is portrayed by the Scriptures as a plural oneness.”[16]

Paul attributes to Jesus the same words of honor Isaiah attributes to Yahweh:

“Though he was God, he did not demand and cling to his rights as God. He made himself nothing; he took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. And in human form he obediently humbled himself even further by dying a criminal’s death on a cross.

Because of this, God raised him up to the heights of heaven and gave him a name that is above every other name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:6-11 NLT)

This passage reveals that before Jesus became a man, he had the full rights of the Godhead. Paul also tells us, “that every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.”

Over seven hundred years before Christ, God tells us through Isaiah that He alone is God, Lord, and Savior:

“Before Me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after Me. I, even I, am the Lord, and besides Me there is no Savior” (Isaiah 43:10,11).

We are also told in the Old Testament that Yahweh alone created the universe. That “every knee shall bow to Him.” That He is “the Lord, the King of Israel.” “The Redeemer.” “The First and the Last.” Daniel calls Him “Ancient of Days.” Zechariah speaks of God as “the King, the Lord of Hosts who will judge the earth.”

But in the New Testament we hear John call Jesus “Savior,” “The Alpha and Omega,” “The First and the Last,” “The King of Kings” and Lord of Lords.” Paul tells us “every knee will bow to Jesus.” It is Jesus alone who the apostles tell us will judge our eternal destiny. Jesus is the preeminent Lord of the universe.

Packer argues that Christianity makes sense only if Jesus is fully God:

“If Jesus had been no more than a very remarkable, godly man, the difficulties in believing what the New Testament tells us about his life and work would be truly mountainous.

“But if Jesus was the same person as the eternal Word, the Father’s agent in creation, ‘through whom also he made the worlds’ (Heb. 1:2 RV), it is no wonder if fresh acts of creative power marked his coming into this world, and his life in it, and his exit from it. It is not strange that he, the Author of life, should rise from the dead....The Incarnation is in itself an unfathomable mystery, but it makes sense of everything else that the New Testament contains.”[17]

Conclusion

If Jesus is Yahweh, then the Christian message is that God Himself came to earth, allowed men to spit on Him, mock him, and nail Him to a cross as a supreme sacrifice for our sin. God’s perfect justice could only be satisfied by God Himself as the payment for our sin and unrighteousness. No angel or created proxy would suffice. Such an act of condescension demonstrates the immensity of the Father’s love as well as the high value He places upon each of us (See “Why Jesus?” at <http://y-jesus.com/wwrj/7-jesus-relevant-today>) . And this is exactly what the apostles taught and so fervently preached.

In his parting words to the Ephesian elders, Paul encouraged them to “shepherd the church of God, which he purchased with His own blood (Acts 20:28 NASB). Paul is echoing Zechariah’s prophecy where God (Yahweh)

says,

"In that day the Lord will defend the inhabitants of Jerusalem....and they will look on Me whom they have pierced and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son (Zech 12:8a, 10b).

Zechariah reveals that the one pierced on the cross was none other than God, Himself. Thus, we see that Jesus Christ brings Old and New Testaments together like separate instruments harmonize to create a beautiful symphony. For, unless Jesus is God, Christianity loses its central theme. But if Jesus is God, all other major Christian doctrines fit together like pieces of a puzzle." Kreeft and Tacelli explain:[18]

- "If Christ is divine, then the incarnation, or 'enfleshing' of God, is the most important event in history. It is the hinge of history. It changes everything."
- "If Christ is God, then when he died on the cross, heaven's gate, closed by sin, opened up to us for the first time since Eden. No event in history could be more important to every person on earth than that."
- "If Christ is God, then, since he is omnipotent and present right now, he can transform you and your life right now as nothing and no one else possibly can."
- "If Christ is divine, he has a right to our entire lives, including our inner life and our thoughts."

The apostles made Jesus Lord of their lives, wrote of him as the Creator, and worshipped him as preeminent. These first hand eyewitnesses were absolutely convinced that God had visited planet earth in the Person of Jesus Christ, who will return as King of kings and Lord of lords, as well as our eternal Judge. In his letter to Titus, Paul reveals Jesus' identity, and God's purpose for our lives:

"For the grace of God has been revealed bringing salvation to all people. And we are instructed to turn from godless living and sinful pleasures. We should live in this evil world with self-control, right conduct, and devotion to God, while we look forward to that wonderful event ***when the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, will be revealed.***¹⁹ (Titus 2:11-13 NLT).

Endnotes

1. Will Durant, "Caesar and Christ", vol 3 of *The Story of Civilization* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972), 563.
2. A. H. McNeile, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), 463, 464
3. The title *Lord* is freely used in both Testaments to refer to God and Jesus. In the Old Testament the Hebrew word for Lord was *Adonai*. In the Septuagint and the New Testament the word translated "Lord" is *Kurios*. Both *Adonai* and *Kurios* were used for God by the Jews." Josh McDowell & Bart Larson, *Jesus: A Biblical Defense of His Deity*(San Bernardino: Here's Life, 1983), 33.
4. Paul L. Maier, Ed, *Eusebius, The Church History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1999), 149.
5. Although most early Christians believed in Jesus' divinity, the church didn't clarify what that meant until the Council of Nicaea in 325 A. D., when the Roman emperor Constantine convened church leaders together to deal with Arius's view that Jesus was a created being. However, after an intense debate over the meaning of the apostles' words about Jesus in the New Testament, all but two of 318 church leaders reaffirmed the majority Christian belief that he is fully God, co-eternal, co-equal and with the Father and Holy Spirit (See "Mona Lisa's Smirk" at <http://y-jesus.com/wwrj/2-da-vinci-conspiracy>).
6. See "Jesus.doc" at <http://y-jesus.com/wwrj/4-are-gospels-true/> to discover the reliability of the New Testament
7. Martin writes, "Contrary to the translations of The Emphatic Diaglott and the New World Translation (of the Jehovah's Witnesses) the Greek grammatical construction leaves no doubt whatsoever that this is the only possible rendering of the text....Jehovah's Witnesses in their New World Translation Appendix 773-777 attempt to discredit the Greek text on this point, for they realize that if Jesus and Jehovah are "One" in nature their theology cannot stand...." Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis, Minn: Bethany, 1974), 75.
8. F. F. Bruce, *The Deity of Christ* (Manchester, England: Wright's [Sandbach] Ltd., 1964

9. F. F. Bruce, "The 'Christ Hymn' of Colossians 1:15-20," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (April-June 1984): 101.
10. D. Guthrie & J. A. Motyer, *The New Bible Commentary: Revised* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), 1144.
11. Bruce, 'Hymn', 101-102.
12. Although the author of Hebrews is unknown, some scholars believe it was written by Paul.
13. The Amplified Bible, Zondervan
14. Kenneth S. Wuest, *Word Studies in the Greek New Testament, Vol. II* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 41.
15. John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2000), 33.
16. Norman Geisler & Peter Bocchino, *Unshakable Foundations* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2001), 297.
17. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press), 54.
18. Peter Kreeft & Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 152.
19. "The Granville Sharpe rule of Greek grammar states that when two nouns are joined by *kai* (and) and the first noun has the article and the second does not, then the two nouns refer to the same thing. Hence, 'great God and Savior' both refer to Christ Jesus." (*The Moody Handbook of Theology*, p. 225).

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