

## Peter's Declaration about Jesus

<sup>13</sup> Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" <sup>14</sup> And they said, "Some say John the Baptist but others Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." <sup>15</sup> He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" <sup>16</sup> Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah,<sup>[a]</sup> the Son of the living God." <sup>17</sup> And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven. <sup>18</sup> And I tell you, you are Peter,<sup>[b]</sup> and on this rock<sup>[c]</sup> I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. <sup>19</sup> I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." <sup>20</sup> Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was<sup>[d]</sup> the Messiah.<sup>[e]</sup>

## Who do you say that I am?

There has never been a more important question asked of anyone. This is the first question, the question from which all others flow. How we answer this question determines not only our destiny, but the very nature and meaning of our lives and of creation.

Who do we say this Jesus is?

Maybe some would say Jesus is a liar or lunatic, certainly not God. Some say Jesus is a good teacher. A moral guru that taught admirable things, surely, like loving others and not lying, cheating or stealing. A good person, but not God, of course. Some may go further, conceding Jesus as God, but one of many paths to heaven, of equal importance and truth value as the Buddha, as Krishna, or the Mother Goddess. How we answer the question of who Jesus is makes all the difference, however, and Jesus left us but one answer. Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, but think carefully before you answer, because your answer changes everything.

A lot of us think that since we know about Jesus, everybody in America must too. They are surely aware of the claims that Jesus made, of the fulfilled prophecies, and so on. Well, I am here to tell you nothing could be further from the truth. There are plenty of people who have gained their knowledge of Jesus from, often inaccurate, Facebook memes. I'm also here to tell you there's something about being in the ministry that causes people to try to have the most ridiculous theology arguments with you. When I was graduating seminary a lot of my classmates were talking about this coffee mug that read please do not confuse your Google search with my theology degree. Personally I don't care for credentialism, and there's plenty of people who are not formally trained who know far more about the faith than I do, but that's not to say that certain conversations don't bring that coffee mug back to mind.

My best friend's son, who I've known since he was like 7, argued with me that Jesus was not God or the Son of God and that is not what Christians believe. I've had numerous people tell me that Jesus never claims to be God in the Scripture. This is patently false. Simon Peter declares Jesus the son of the living God and Jesus confirms this; in fact, he tells us that on this statement all of the Christian church would be built. In the Gospel of John, Jesus makes no less than seven special declarations of his divinity. These seven statements are referred to as the "I Am" statements and include I am the bread of life, I am the true vine, etc. unfortunately the English hides just how radical these statements were. Thousands of years before Jesus, Moses would ask the name of God to give to the Israelites. God gave the name Yahweh, which is a curious piece of Hebrew that loosely means I Am that I am, or more accurately, I will be who I will be. There is nothing that God can be compared to, no one for God to swear by. When Jesus makes these seven statements, he is using that special word for himself. He is claiming the divine name. This is why the "I am" statements are often followed by shrieks of blasphemy and violence. The Jews understood very clearly what was being said, a nuisance lost to us in English.

Jesus was very clear and adamant that he is God and the son of the living God. He does not claim to be a good moral teacher. He does not claim to be an ordinary man. He claims to be God. To deny his declaration is to call Jesus a liar or a lunatic, as CS Lewis points out. Lewis referred to this as the trilemma. He writes: 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 patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to...Now it seems to me obvious that He was neither a lunatic nor a fiend: and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that He was and is God.”

Who do you say that I am? A moral teacher? No. Christ has not left us that option. A liar? Even his most hateful enemies deny that Jesus ever spoke a lie and attest to his character. A lunatic? It would've only been madness if the tomb had remained full, which Apostles and Roman Guards alike pledged that tomb was empty and Christ had risen despite their testimony meaning certain and very unpleasant death. No, however strange and terrifying it may be, the only answer left us is that Jesus is God.

Some will concede this, but qualify their answer. Jesus is God, but we need not give him any answer. He is but one of many, and it is just as valid to seek enlightenment after the Buddha, to seek the dissolution of the one with the Hindu Brahmen, or to trust the Great Mother and Father for endless reincarnation with Wicca.

This answer to Jesus' question who do I say that I am protects us from the consequences of the answer, from the strangeness and terror. If Jesus is but one of many then we need not do anything with our answer. We need not change. We need not worry over the souls of those we love, because their truth is just as valid. We can pick and chose from all the religions, like a big buffet or a patchwork quilt. Jesus said to love our enemies, and let me tell you, that is not fun, so if all faiths are equal I think I'll take the bit about hexing my enemies from Wicca. Before someone gets mad at me and says I'm not portraying Wicca fairly, while it seems most Wicca's take a dim view of cursing, my best friend in her travels found a shop that sold Wiccan hexes and curses and bought one she called mother-in-law begone. It sits on my mantle to this day. So far it works. I'm just kidding! Well, about most of that, anyway.

Jesus never claimed to be one of many. Just the opposite. Time and again he declared himself to be the one true God, the only way to salvation. When humanity had separated itself from God through sin, when there was no way back for us, nothing but infinite punishment, it was Jesus who stood in our place. Throughout all of history we humans have cried to the gods endlessly for salvation, but when it mattered, Jesus stood alone, Jesus as the one true God.

Who do you say that I am? You are the Christ, the son of the living God, by whom we will all be saved. What a terrifying answer. If we join with Simon Peter, we must accept that we are sinful, fallen people, that we are infinitely separated from the holiness of God but by the sacrifice of Jesus. We must accept that there is truth in this world, and that truth compels us to action. We cannot stay still. If Jesus is God, then we are called to discipleship, to live every moment striving to be conformed to the image of the Son of God. It will be hard. Sometimes, it will hurt, often times, we will fail. We will be called to uncomfortable situations, we will be called to work for the kingdom of God, we will be called to follow Jesus and to seek God's kingdom before all things, before our comfort or our ego. We will be called to the greatest more terrifying adventure we can't even imagine. Sometimes we will see our path leading up the mountain, and other times, most times, we will only be able to see the next step and not an inch more. Sometimes we will end up in places we never imagined, maybe the mission field in Colombia, or maybe the mission field in the alley down the street from your house. Sometimes we might meet incredible people, like the pastor who preached to the queen, and other times we might meet incredible people like the prostitute who discovers that she is worth so much more. Sometimes we will share the Gospel with someone who scoffs at us, and sometimes we will share the gospel with someone who will receive it like the most precious thing they have ever found, because it is. And all of this is wonderful and amazing and unbelievable and terrifying.

Who do you say that I am? Deep breath.

You are the Christ, the son of the living God by whom we will all be saved, and that means I'm me, and you have a call on my life, and I am here, and I am ready, let's build the church.

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September 10, 2023