

Apologetics in Preaching

You Have to Do Something with This Jesus Character

By Michael Berg

God or bad man? This ancient dilemma has faced skeptics for centuries. If Jesus is not true God, then he is a liar for claiming divinity and therefore a bad man. C.S. Lewis made the dilemma famous as a "Trilemma: Liar, Lunatic, or Lord." We will add one more and call it "The Four L's: Legend, Liar, Lunatic, or Lord." When we look at the evidence of Christ, only a few options emerge. Jesus of Nazareth is either a legend, liar, lunatic, or who he says he is, Lord Almighty.

The dilemma turned argument poses a striking challenge: You have to do something with this Jesus character. Ambivalence is not an option for the thinking human. It seems Jesus had this in mind when he said, "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters" (Lk 11:23). A reasonable and thoughtful person will have an opinion about Abraham Lincoln, Joseph Stalin, current politicians, and many other famous people. A man cannot expect to be taken seriously if he says, "Stalin? I don't know. I guess I don't have an opinion about him." How much more for the man who has been written about more than any other person, Jesus of Nazareth?

The burden of proof is on the skeptic.

First, the argument. Can we come to a reasonable conclusion that Jesus is a legend? No respected historian believes that the carpenter's Son did not exist. There is too much biblical and extra biblical evidence. He is not a myth. Of course, the claim that Jesus performed miracles and rose from the dead is another matter. These claims are bolstered by the historical reliability of the New Testament texts and the fact that the

earliest Christians risked martyrdom for their belief in his divinity. We encountered these arguments in previous issues. The challenge to the skeptic is to make a decision, legend or not? If the skeptic comes down on the side of legend, then he must back this up with more than an *a priori* stance against the existence of a divine being. The burden of proof is on the skeptic when it comes to the most famous person in the history of the world.

Can we come to a reasonable conclusion that Jesus is a liar? We humans are experienced liars but we almost always have a selfish motive. So what is the motive? What did Jesus gain for his so-called deception? Did he gain power, revenge, sex, or money (the reasons why we humans lie)? He only gained death by crucifixion. My Old Adam will take a lie a long way but the gig is up when they bring out the cross and nails! Why would Jesus lie? Again the burden is on the skeptic to prove that Jesus lied. There is no plausible motive for such a deception.

Can we come to a reasonable conclusion that Jesus was a lunatic? We do not live in an era or place, thankfully, in which an accusation of insanity automatically gets a person institutionalized. The burden of proof is most definitely on the accuser in this case. Can we find evidence of a certain pathology in the writings about Christ? This is not an obscure topic. Albert Schweitzer famously wrote his doctoral thesis on the sanity of Jesus. Can we find any indication from the ancient texts that the man from Nazareth had a mental disorder besides the *a priori* insistence that there is no God and therefore Jesus is crazy for thinking he is divine? No credible case has been made for this conviction. There is no evidence that Jesus was a lunatic.

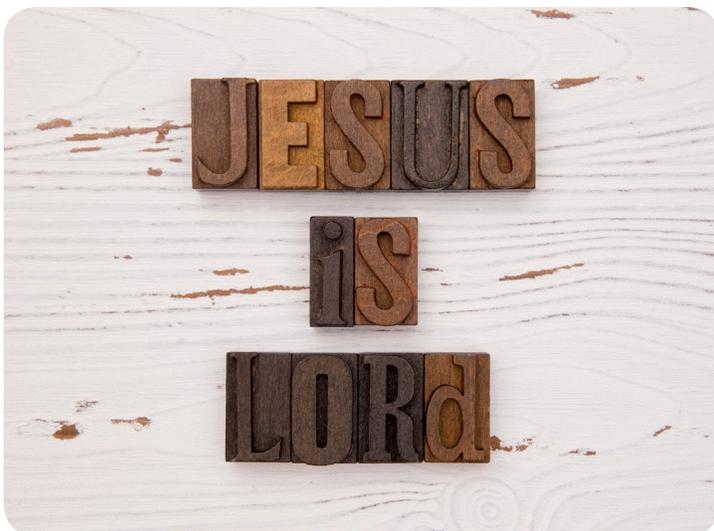
This leaves us with only one option left: Lord Almighty.

The argument is not without its critics¹ but it still serves a valuable apologetic purpose. The argument places an intellectual decision before the skeptic without making it a spiritual decision (decision theology). The skeptic cannot simply brush aside Jesus of Nazareth so easily. He or she is forced to think through this rejection. Is it because I don't want to believe it, or do I have solid intellectual reasons for disbelieving in the divinity of Christ?

The argument is also particularly valuable in today's cultural climate which I would describe as heavily moralistic. Righteous indignation seems to be at an all-time high. It is less and less acceptable to be indifferent about any matter. Nor is it good enough to simply have an opinion. Your righteous indignation, if it is to be taken seriously, must be active. We are tripping over ourselves to be more righteous than the next person. From straws to balloons to black lives matter to blue lives matter to all lives matter, we are activists in constant search for a cause. The higher moral ground is not a place of humility but a place of pride, and the race to get there first is fiercely competitive.²

The Four L's are not the end of the conversation but only the beginning.

Here we find an apologetic opportunity to push the issue. You have to do something with this Jesus character. It deserves some thought. It deserves an open-mind. You cannot be indifferent. I do believe that there will be a time, if not already here, when we will get tired of these attempts at self-righteousness. It's exhausting. I am sure the warriors will still fight but there will be (and are) better angels who yearn for a more thoughtful political discourse and robust discussion of religion, philosophy, and culture. The Four L's are a good place to start a conversation.



It's not the end of the conversation but only the beginning. The goal is to have thoughtful conversation about the real Jesus and let the Spirit do his work.

There is a uniqueness about this particular moment, as there is about every particular historical moment. There is a strong desire for authenticity, thoughtfulness, and moral understanding as we emerge from the plastic, often shallow, and material-driven era of late modernity. Along with this comes a heightened awareness of the past, diversity, and the connection between the physical and the spiritual. Who are we? Where did we come from? Is the body all there is? How should we act? These are, of course, the same questions we have always asked. The difference is that we now live with the unfilled promise of modern progress.

We cannot escape the big questions of life. But why is that the case? Why are we not indifferent about the environmental impact of straws or human trafficking? Could it be that we are something different than just the material? We are not just a pile of molecules arranged differently than the soil. We are alive. But, then again, so are plants. We are different. We are aware of our surroundings and interact with the world in a more sophisticated way than the dandelion. But so do the animals. Yet we are different than the animals too, aren't we? We are self-aware. We interact with language on a higher level. We strive for something more than squirreling away nuts for the winter. We seek beauty, morality, and progress. We are often overcome with a sense of wonderment. We also seek justification, that is, we desire value. We want our existence and our actions justified. We want to be just, right, righteous. Who doesn't want to be seen as valuable, just, and right? We are, in short, created in the image of God, though damaged by the Fall. We know that we are important. Yet the greatest distinction is found in Christ. God became one of us to redeem us. This is what ultimately separates us from the dirt, dandelions, and squirrels.

We are right to push the skeptic's worldview to its ultimate conclusions.

We are also confessors. We have opinions, right and wrong. We speak our minds, wisely and foolishly. As apologists we are right to force the issue: So what do you say about this? We are right to push the skeptic's worldview to its ultimate conclusions. Can a material only view really explain the love I have for my children or the wonderment I feel looking up into the night sky or the rush I experience when I discover something new or accomplish a seemingly impossible task? Can a moral relativist justify her righteous anger towards the racist or the pedophile, let alone a capitalist economy? Can human rights survive in a worldview that sees no difference between a human and a chicken? The apologist is right to ask the skeptic, "What do you say?"

Have I inspired the people in the pews to be thinkers and confessors?

For the Christian preacher the question becomes this: Can I both present apologetical arguments such as the reliability of the New Testament texts *and* display the fullness of a Christian worldview? Can I offer something more than “Jesus, my friend” or “Jesus, my copilot?” Have I missed an opportunity to be profound? Have I missed an opportunity to have a real conversation about the real Jesus? Have I inspired the people in the pews to be thinkers and confessors? Can we send out evangelists (the people in the pews) armed with more than trite one-liners but with a deep understanding of the big questions? Can we send out confessors?

We see an example of Jesus asking a similar question of Peter in the readings for Pentecost 5 (July 14, 2019). In the Gospel for the day Jesus famously asks his apostle, “But what about you, who do you say I am?” (Lk 9:18-24). Zechariah speaks about the remnant which is refined in fire. God will declare, “They are my people” and the faithful will respond, “The LORD is our God” (Ze 13:7-9). God declares grace and his people confess. Our identity (the people of God) is made personal in baptism, a theme we encounter in the Second Reading (Ga 3:23-29). After Peter answers his Lord’s questions correctly, “The Christ of God,” Jesus explains who the Christ is and what he does: “The Son of Man must suffer many things.” This fits with the Psalm selection for the day, Psalm 22.

Here is an attempt to preach the good news of who Jesus is and arouse the listener to think deeply and, when called upon, confess Jesus as the Christ.

I think that there are as many Jesuses as there are people in the world. What I mean is this: Everybody has an opinion about Christ. There is a republican Jesus, a Marxist Jesus, a self-help Jesus, a life-coach Jesus, a moral crusader Jesus. You name it and you will find somebody who has that particular image of Jesus. Those images look remarkably like what the person wants Jesus to be. But Jesus is the ultimate iconoclast, breaking the image we have created of him.

Your Jesus often looks like he was made in your image instead of the other way around.

You too have an image of Jesus. You do. If you are honest, you will admit that this Jesus often looks like he was made in your image instead of the other way around. Such is the constant battle of being a sinner-saint. This is another reason to stay in the Scriptures. That’s where the real Jesus is revealed, shattering



our images of him. And that’s a good thing because our image of God is only as good as our imaginations. I need a better God than that and so do you.

In the Gospel Reading we heard Jesus ask this question, “Who do people say I am?” The answer came from his disciples, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and still others, that one of the prophets long ago has come back to life.” All fine and reasonable answers, better than life-coach! But all those answers were incorrect.

Jesus then asked Peter, “But what about you?”

Peter got it right, “The Christ of God.”

Then Jesus explains Peter’s answer (I wonder if Peter’s answer was a catechism class answer, the right words but without full understanding). “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”

A God who dies? Not exactly the image Peter or anybody else had in mind. Jesus really is the ultimate iconoclast, shattering the image we have of the divine. He is the God on the cross displaying a love our imaginations could never invent. He is the Psalm 22 God of whom we just chanted moments ago. “I am a worm and not a man,” he says, carrying our sins in our place. “But you, O Lord, be not far off,” he cries in sure hope of his resurrection and ours.

So I challenge you today as Jesus did Peter, “Who do you say Jesus is?” Is he merely your personal guide in life? You know, the guy you rely on for advice. Or is he the eternal creator who made you and this world, the reason up is up and $1+1=2$, the one who knew you before creation and has set up good deeds for you to accomplish until the day he takes your tired soul to an eternal Sabbath rest?

Is he simply a motivational speaker or is he the one you are crucified with in daily repentance and resurrected with so that every day is a new day for you, forgetting the past as you stare into eternal freedom?

Is he only your moral guide, an example to follow, or is he the God-man who comes crashing into our world with words of absolutism and a heavenly meal as medicine for your sinful soul?

Is he the rabbi who only tells you how to live or the one who lives in your place? Is he only there for you when times are good or does he give you permission to enter the darkness as he lays a cross before you?

Now consider what your friends and acquaintances say about Jesus. Who does the world say Jesus is? And how about this question: who are you? Who are the people you meet? Are we simply a pile of material or are we souls created by God himself, people so valuable to him that he died for them? What does the world say about Jesus and about humanity? I bet it is different than what we find in Scripture. Can you help them? Can you confess?

Can you confess the real Jesus, the cross Jesus, the Psalm 22 Jesus, to these precious souls? It's not always easy to shatter someone's image, is it? But Christ will give you the faith and the words. He will. You will fail at times. That's okay. Keep confessing. And for every failure there is refinement, whether you feel it or not. Did you hear God through the prophet Zechariah today? The shepherd is struck and the sheep scatter, but there remain those he refines in fire, those he tests like gold.

That's you. "These are my people," God says about you, "My people." Here is your identity: baptized into Christ, clothed in his righteousness, justified, not by your own actions but by his. Declared valuable, made perfect, dearly loved. "My people," he declares. You are his people. And his people confess. "Who do you say I am?" Jesus asks you. And the answer comes every week, "I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord." This is who you are. This is who the refiner made you to be.

So, when the time is right you will be able to say, "Oh, no, my dear friend! Jesus is so much more than law giver, so much deeper than mere story, more real than myth, so much more important than teacher, friend, or guide, he is your everything. He is your beginning, your end, and everything in between. This is the Christ of God, lover of you, the sinner, giver of life to the dead, and consolation for the broken hearted. Oh, dear friend, here is Jesus, the Christ of God."

¹ Some objections are easily dispelled by someone with an average knowledge of the Gospels. One example is the claim that Jesus never thought of himself divine because he never claimed divinity. Other objections are more subtle. One example is that Jesus thought he was divine but that didn't make him insane but rather a zealous Jew of his day. In this case a modern person can still appreciate his teachings without having to come to a conclusion that he is divine.

² The tragedy of this situation is that legitimate causes are often obscured.

Books for Further Study

The Psychiatric Study of Jesus: Exposition and Criticism
by Albert Schweitzer

Tactics by Gregory Koukl

Prepared to Answer and More Prepared to Answer by
Mark Paustian

Theologia et Apologia edited by Adam Francisco, Corey
Mass, and Steven Mueller

Scientism and Secularism by JP Moreland

The Reason I Believe by Allen Quist

The Heresy of Orthodoxy by Andreas Köstenberger and
Michael Kruger

