

Who Is Jesus?

BY ALISTAIR BEGG



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If we compare Christmas to a jigsaw puzzle that we put together once a year, we find some pieces are missing. We hope somehow they will have been found this year. We dip into the box and begin to put the puzzle together again, only to discover that the same gaps are present as the last time. If Christmas is a crossword puzzle, here we are again at 20 across and 15 down and we have no solution for either. We cannot conclude the puzzle.

I am thinking particularly about the question of the identity of Jesus Christ. Who is Jesus Christ, and why did He come? Some people's answer to that is straightforward and speedy, "Jesus was just a man," but then they realize there is so much about Him that transcends mere humanity. It puzzles and intrigues them. At the same time they discover the Bible says that Jesus was actually God. That seems too hard for many to swallow. Then too, the idea that Jesus could possibly be both God and man at the same time is beyond them. It is not uncommon for people to say the idea that Jesus is both God and man is totally illogical.

The most notorious challenge to the issue of the

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Incarnation, the deity of Jesus, has come in the last fifteen years from an English theologian, not writing as an atheist to challenge Christianity, but writing as an apparent member of Christendom to try to make Christianity more appealing to the man in the street. The theologian determined that since the idea of Jesus being both divine and human is too large a piece to chew and swallow, he wrote to dispense with what he regarded as a piece of theological lumber.

The author relied on the work of a philosopher by the name of Spinoza. Spinoza said that to speak of Jesus as both human and divine is as illogical as speaking of a square circle, but Alistair McGrath points out that the idea of a square circle is an absurdity. Both a square and a circle are examples of shapes, and a single shape cannot be both a square and a circle at one time. It is absurd because a square and a circle are the same type of thing. To suggest that absurdity exists between Godhood and manhood is not apropos, because Godhood and manhood are two different things. God is Creator and man is creature. So why is it not logical that both divinity and humanity should coexist?

That does not address the issue of whether they do or not. It just addresses the issue of absurdity. Alistair McGrath gives an example of how divinity and humanity could happen together. He says that his friend Francis is both British and Swiss. He has a dual nationality. A logical contradiction exists only if being British excludes being Swiss. Therefore, why should being human exclude being divine? Cannot Jesus be both a citizen of heaven and a citizen of earth?

We need to be thinking these things out in these days. Otherwise we may be like the Englishman trying to buy stamps in a post office in Paris. When he encounters the French-speaking man behind the counter, the Englishman determines he will speak English a little louder and a little slower, pompously believing the Frenchman will respond to that. Some of us Christians are living with the illusion that the way to speak to our world is just to speak a little louder and a little slower. We continue to affirm certain things. We think if we affirm them, people will believe them, understand them, and accept them. But they do not. And frankly, they should not. We are pompous to believe we can simply bang on the same drum and do none of the difficult thinking and not engage people in

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meaningful dialogue, yet still expect somehow or another they will enter into a believing faith by our encounter.

Did Jesus ever claim to be God? That is the question. That is the bottom line. People say to us from time to time, “I know you say He was God, but did He ever claim to be God?” They have a sneaking suspicion that the reason we declare Him to be God is because we need Him to be God. If He is not God, then He is just one of many on the plane of world religions, and Christianity has lost its dominant role in the world. “You want Him to be God,” our challengers say, “and therefore you read your conclusions into your presupposition, and you start from there.”

What do we say in response to that? First, we have to examine the evidence in the Bible. We have to answer the question, “Does Jesus claim to be God?”

Indirect Claims

In the Bible, Jesus makes direct claims, and He also makes indirect claims. We’ll start with the indirect claims. First, Jesus made staggering

claims about His ability to meet the spiritual needs of others. In the gospel of John there is a great succession of “I am” statements made by Jesus. “I am the light of the world. He who follows me will not walk in darkness.” “I am the bread of life.” “I am the door.” “I am the good shepherd.” “I am the resurrection and the life.” “I am the way, the truth and the life,” and so on.

Why are these “I am” statements significant? Because when Jesus makes each of these statements, He is claiming that He and He alone could meet every individual’s need for forgiveness, peace, security, and direction. And He alone could bring them into a living, eternal relationship with God. He is not simply making interesting statements. He is actually affirming certain convictions about who He is. “Follow Me,” He says, “and you’ll never walk in darkness.” “Eat the bread of life and you’ll never hunger again.” “Follow Me, walk with Me, and I’ll take you directly into heaven.”

It is difficult to imagine how anyone in his right mind could make even one of these claims without believing himself to be God. Imagine a man walking onto the stage of human history and

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saying, “I am the way, the truth, the life. Nobody comes to God the Father but through me.” That man is either a bad man telling lies, or a madman totally deluded or he is the Godman. He is actually who he claims to be.

We need to be able to engage our friends at this level of dialogue. We can say to them, “I know you’ve got a problem with this idea of Jesus being divine, but look at what He said. He’s either a liar, a madman, or God. Do you think He’s a liar?” “No,” they’ll probably say.

“Do you think He’s crazy?” They might say, “No, I don’t think so. He healed people and welcomed them and talked with them. I don’t think he was crazy.”

“Well, then, who do you think He is?” The standard answer is, “I think he was just a good man.”

How can you have a good man who tells lies like this? He did not leave us the option of being a good man. He was either who He said He was, or as C. S. Lewis says, “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.”¹ The evidence in the Bible is that Jesus made staggering statements and claims concerning how He alone could address the spiritual needs of others.

Secondly, He made astonishing claims about His teachings. In Matthew 5:18 during the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.” Jesus was here affirming the authenticity of the Old Testament. He was saying what others would say of the Scriptures—they are from God, they are factual, they cannot be tampered with. Then in Matthew 24:35, He says the same thing about His own words: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.” He was claiming that His words were like the Old Testament words. “The words that I speak are the very words of God. They will never, ever pass away.”

Two thousand years later, we are studying the very words of Jesus, which He said will never pass

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1952), p. 53.

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away, despite the fact that centuries have tried to grind into the dust of oblivion the very truth of the Scriptures.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus also takes false interpretations of the Old Testament and corrects them. He says,

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. (Matthew 5:21–22a)

You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (vv. 27–28)

It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife, ...’ But I tell you, ... (vv. 31–32)

You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you... (vv. 43–44)

And on and on.

What is the point here? If someone else were to take the Bible and say, “You’ve heard what the Bible tells you to do, but I’m telling you to do this other,” we’d be saying back, “Who in the world do you think you are?” What was Jesus doing? He was clearly making astonishing claims about His teaching. He was putting His teaching on a par with the rest of biblical instruction.

Third, Jesus claimed He would be directly involved in all the major aspects of the end of the world. In John 14:3, He says to His disciples, “I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.” Who is this man who stands at a moment in time and space and says, “I’m going to be involved in wrapping up the end of the world”?

Jesus said, “I’m going to go away and I’m going to come back.” This is a relevant statement in our twentieth-century culture. The whole world is consumed with people who have had near death experiences—they have gone away and come back. Yet if you say, “What if I could introduce you to somebody who had an out-of-body experience

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and actually died and definitely came back,” their initial interest would wane when you told them it was Jesus. “Oh, I thought you were going to tell me about a real person who went away and came back.”

Minds that think like this are predisposed to error. They are prepared to believe the most unbelievable things and are at the same time unprepared to accept that which is explicit in the statements of Jesus. He said, “I’m going to go away and I’m going to come back.” In John 5:27, He said He was going to be involved in the judgment of the world: “And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man.” Realizing people’s jaws would be hanging down in response to this, He said, “Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned. By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me” (John 5:28–30).

In Matthew 25:31–32, Jesus says, “... he will sit on his throne ... and he will separate the people one

from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.”

Some people say, “Isn’t Jesus just like Buddha? Isn’t Jesus just like Krishna? Isn’t He just like another Hindu avatar?” When we answer, “No, He’s not,” they ask, “How is He not?” Some of us may answer, “I don’t know how He’s not. I just know He’s not.” A person who has genuine questions about Jesus is not going to put up with that nonsense. If we cannot say why Jesus is not like Buddha, we are likely to get this kind of response: “Thank you very much, you don’t know anything. You are a Christian ignoramus and you are annoying me. Don’t stand there and shout in my face. Listen to my questions and go home and do your homework until you know the answer.”

One of the answers is that Buddha never said he was going to sit on a throne and be involved in the judgment of the world. One of the other answers is that Buddha never claimed to be the one who spoke the very oracles and words of God. But it takes some Sunday afternoons with a concordance to come up with answers. It takes some evenings with your Bible and a pencil. It takes some thinking. It takes some discovering. It

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takes some diligence. All any reasonable teacher can do is stir within you the desire to become a student of the Bible. You cannot be spoon-fed into being able to articulate your faith. It takes hard work.

The fourth thing Jesus made clear in His indirect claims was that people's reaction to Him was an indication of their reaction to God. In John 14, Jesus has just said He is going away and He will come back and receive them unto Himself, when Philip steps up and asks a question. Philip is a great guy to have in class because he always asks the dumb question you were afraid to ask yourself. Philip says, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us" (v. 8). Jesus answers him, "Don't you know me, Philip?" What is Jesus saying here? He is saying, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (v. 9). Some people say Jesus never ever claimed to be God. What is this, if not a claim to be God?

Back in John 12, Jesus was addressing the Jews in their unbelief. He was preaching out of the Old Testament, showing how the Old Testament tied in with the New. Verses 42 through 45 say, "But because of the Pharisees they would not confess

their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved praise from men more than praise from God. Then Jesus cried out, ‘When a man believes in me, he does not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me. When he looks at me, he sees the one who sent me.’”

The same thing happens when Jesus welcomes the children in Mark’s gospel. In Mark 9:36–37, He takes a little child in His arms and says, “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me.” And then here comes the kicker: “And whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”

In John, the flip side of it is also very clear. Jesus says in John 5:22, “The Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son.” Why? “That all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent Him” (v. 23). That is straightforward.

Perhaps someone were to come to you and say, “I am a believer. I believe in God, I honor Jehovah. I just don’t honor Jesus the Son. I don’t believe he is the incarnate Son of God. But I’m okay because I

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honor the Father.”

What does Jesus say to that? “He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him.”

Now, Mormon people are lovely, really committed to the family, committed to doing well in business, strong in certain foundational principles. But in dialogue with us they say, “We honor the Father; we do not honor Christ as the incarnate Son of God.” Mormons who tell you they do are either deluded and have not understood the teaching or they are lying to you. Orthodox Mormonism does not honor Christ as the co-equal, co-eternal Son of God. They affirm, “We honor the Father.”

Let’s look at what Jesus says. “He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent Him.”

So what then is the spiritual power which impels Mormonism? If it is impossible not to honor God the Father except in the righteous honor of the Son, then those who claim to honor the Father and ignore the Son do not honor the Father. So where is their spiritual power coming from?

John 15:23 says, “He who hates me hates my Father as well.”

Some people say, “I don’t hate God. I just hate anyone who says Jesus is God, because nowhere does the Bible suggest that.” But Jesus says in the Bible, “You say you hate me, then you hate my Father as well.” Why? Jesus says, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). “You can’t talk about me without talking about my Dad and you can’t talk about my Dad without talking about me. So don’t say you can love my Dad and hate me.”

On a more superficial level, you can tell a lot about how people feel about the father by the way they treat his kids. The Father looks down from heaven and instructs, “You honor my Son. You listen to His words.” Someone replies, “I don’t want to listen to His words. I just want to honor You.” And Jesus’ comeback is the same: “You can’t honor the Father unless you honor the Son. If you hate Me, you hate God.”

The Jewish people in Jesus’ day could not stomach that. They said, Listen, “Abraham is our father” (see John 8:39). “We don’t have to listen to this stuff, Jesus. We are nice, upright, religious people.

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We have Abraham as our father. We can go to the real source.”

Jesus said to them, “You belong to your father the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire... He is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). Did a madman speak these words? Or a bad man? Or the Godman?

Direct Claims

Although Jesus never in the record of the New Testament said the actual words, “I am God,” He did make the staggering claim using other words. The first example is in John 5.

John 5 is the record of healing that takes place at the pool of Bethesda, surrounded by five great covered colonnades. “Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years” (vv. 3–5). This last man was healed by Jesus. “Then Jesus said to him ‘Get up! Pick up your mat and walk’” (v. 8).

It is interesting to ponder the response of established religion to his healing. The day on

which this took place was a Sabbath, so the Jews said to the man who had been healed, “You’re not allowed to carry your mat on the Sabbath” (John 5:10). Here is a man who for 38 years has lain on his back. He is instantaneously healed. He picks up his mat and starts walking, and all that religion can say is, “Hey, you’re not supposed to carry the mat. It’s Sunday. Who told you to do that?”

Verse 13 says, “The man who was healed had no idea who it was...” Jesus did not come up and say, “Good morning. I am the incarnate Son of God and I want to do a miracle.” He just said, “Hey, get the mat. Let’s go, buddy.” Then He slipped away into the crowd.

What a wonderful picture of ministry in a self-focused world, where we all want to get the attention. We would be standing up in a pulpit saying, “It was me. I did it. I did it.”

But they could not find the one who healed the man. Later Jesus saw the man at the temple and said, “Hey, I see you’re well again. Stop sinning so something worse doesn’t happen to you.” The man then went and told the Jews, “I met him at the temple. The guy who did this was Jesus.”

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So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jews persecuted Him. Jesus looked them in the eye and said, “Listen, God is at work. He is not bound by your understanding of the Sabbath law. I am working as He is working, and He works in Me and through Me, so I am not bound by your Sabbath law either.” And verse 18 says, “For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; Not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.”

They understood the implication. They said, “He is saying he’s God.” Jesus did nothing to correct their interpretation. In Acts, when people begin to worship Paul because of a great miracle of healing, Paul tears his clothes and tells them not to worship him, to only worship God. When John on the island of Patmos bows down to an angel, the angel says, “Don’t do that. I’m just a fellow servant with you. Worship God” (see Revelation 19:10; 22:9).

But Jesus, when the people said, “This man is making himself equal with God” (see John 5:18), did not tell them, “No, I’m not saying that.” He did not say, “I’m just a good guy. I’ve just got some

powers, but I don't know where they came from.” That is what people want Him to say, but He does not say it.

Another direct claim is in John 8:56–58. Jesus said to the Jews, “Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.”

The Jews said, “Wait a minute. You're not yet 50 years old and you've seen Abraham?” And Jesus replied, “Before Abraham was born, I am!”

Some people want to suggest the Jesus was simply claiming to be over 2,000 years old, in which case He must have been wearing particularly well, wouldn't you say? Was He simply claiming to be around before time existed? Was He simply saying He was an angel, a created being, which was the heresy of Arius in the fourth century? No, because the question which spurred this response was, “Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?” (John 8:53). It is a great question, because a Jew could conceive of nobody greater than Abraham. Apart from God, Abraham was at the top of the list. They didn't ask, “Are you older than Abraham?” They asked, “Are you greater?”

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And the kicker they got back was “Before Abraham was born, I am.”

Why did this hit them so hard? Because they knew that was one of the key names God used in the Old Testament to describe Himself. God told Moses to tell the Israelites, “Tell them I Am has sent you” (see Exodus 3:14). So when Jesus said, “Before Abraham was, I am,” the Jews picked up stones to stone Him. They were not about to stone Him because of a claim that He was 2,000 years old. They were not about to stone Him because He was an angel. But claiming to be God was blasphemy, and the penalty was stoning. It is the same today. Men and women in secular America are not going to stone Jesus because He claims to have been around a long time. They will not crucify Jesus because He is propounded to be an angel or says He has existed from before time began. That is okay. That fits in our New Age world. You believe what you believe, and I’ll believe what I believe. But do not ever try to maintain that Jesus Christ is the only way to heaven, the only possibility of forgiveness.

The two great issues of articulating the Christian faith in our postmodern world are the resurrection

and the incarnation. If we do not affirm them, we will be responsible for ushering in a generation where Christianity ceases to have any impact on our culture.

In John 10, Jesus is speaking of the fact that He has sheep who listen to His voice. In verses 29 and 30, He says of them, “My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.”

The word which is used there for “one” is not in the masculine. It is in the neuter. This is significant in that the claim Jesus was making was simply to be one in substance and essence with God the Father. As a result of making that affirmation, He was met with a quite violent reaction. “The Jews picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus said to them, I have shown you many miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?” (vv. 31–32). It was almost as if He wanted to elicit from them this response so as to underpin the claim He had so clearly made.

They replied, “We are not stoning you for any of these, ... but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God” (v. 33). And still people walk

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the streets of America and say, “Well, I’m not sure Jesus Himself ever claimed to be God.”

The Jewish mind was in no way misled concerning what Jesus was claiming. That is why they responded the way they did. Stoning was the justifiable reaction to blasphemy, and blasphemy was the claim on the part of any mere man to actually be God.

In John 14, Jesus declares to His disciples that He is the way and the truth and the life, and no man can come to the Father but through Him. He follows that up by saying, “If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him” (v. 7). Clearly Jesus is making a reference to Himself.

But Philip responds by saying, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us” (v. 8). Back in the Old Testament, God made it clear to Moses, “You cannot see my face, for no one may see Me and live” (Exodus 33:20). Then God put Moses in the cleft of a rock and covered him with His hand when His glory passed by. Moses was allowed to see God’s back, but not His face. The Jewish mind grew up understanding this. There was no possible

way anyone could see God face to face. Yet Philip asks Jesus to show him the Father.

Jesus tells Philip and us, “Understand this. In My own life and in My personality, I am revealing all of the nature and character of God that it is possible for a human being to see and to know.” Down through the corridors of time, Jesus tells all who are interested to know God, “Look at Me.” It is a surprise to me how many people have rejected Christianity without ever having examined its claims. They simply reject it out of hand on the basis of conjecture and various pieces of scientific jargon. But the honest person, the real scientist, the genuine skeptic, the honest seeker in looking for spiritual reality must eventually come to this statement by Jesus, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father also.”

Jesus addresses the Father in His high priestly prayer in John 17:5: “And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.” That would be an interesting statement if it was made just by a man, wouldn’t it? Jesus is speaking of a glory He had known not just at some time in the past but as a part of His eternal possession before the world even

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began. John Blanchard says of these verses, “The picture is so amazing that either he is speaking blasphemous nonsense, or He is addressing God on equal terms.”

The sixth direct claim takes us into John 18, where we have the record by John of the arrest of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Judas came “guiding a detachment of soldiers, some officials from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they were carrying torches, lanterns and weapons. Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, ‘Who is it you want?’ ‘Jesus of Nazareth,’ they replied.”

Jesus responds by saying simply, “I am he.” When He does, the group draws back and falls to the ground. What is going on here? The detachment of soldiers comes to make a routine arrest, but instead of having to chase after their suspect, He walks up to them and asks who they want. When they say, “We want Jesus of Nazareth,” He answers, “I am.” This was the same declaration which upset the Jews so much before. Jesus says, “I am,” and the soldiers fall to the ground. Why? They did not believe any of this stuff. They were not predisposed. They were not

hallucinating. They were just guys going about their business as usual. But in this encounter with Jesus, they fell to the ground, and He gave Himself into their care. Something of the divine glory and power and majesty and wonder of who Jesus is emanated from Him even in that moment when they asked a routine question and He gave His reply.

What Does It Mean?

The first question we asked was, “What did Jesus say?” We have looked at some of that. The second question we must ask is, “What does it mean?”

What does it mean that Jesus made these claims to deity? Putting together what we have learned from John’s gospel and looking at the first verses of 1 John, we begin to realize that Jesus is speaking of the fact of his eternity. This is the reason for the opening phrase of John’s gospel, “In the beginning was the Word.” This *logos* (word) was understood by both the Jewish and the Greek mind to be the essential creating principle. John says, “The Word,” whom he is going to identify as Jesus, “was present in the beginning.” He existed before all creation. He was thereby uncreated, and He was

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eternal.

When people say to you, “Jesus was just another religious figure. He was just a Gandhi or a Buddha or something,” you say, “No, He wasn’t.” Then they’ll ask you, “In what way was he not?” One way you can point out from the evidence was that Jesus actually made claims that none of these other individuals made. And He claimed to have existed from all of eternity.

This first verse in John also reveals to us Jesus’ personality. “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God.” Within the Godhead, Jesus existed in living, active, intimate fellowship. He was not the Father and He was not the Holy Spirit. He was the Son. He was distinct within the triune God.

“In the beginning was the Word,” describes Jesus’ eternity. “And the Word was with God,” shows Jesus’ personality. “And the Word was God,” is Jesus’ deity. Although He was a separate person from the Father, He was not a separate being. That is a phrase you should memorize because it is essential in debating with Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses. The divinity that belongs to

the rest of God belongs to Jesus. It means we can discover what God is like by looking at Jesus. We can only and ultimately discover what God is like by looking at Jesus. When someone says, “There is something within me that thinks there might be a God or some creative principle, but I’m not sure where to look or what I should do,” the answer to this is, “Consider Jesus.”

You may know the story of the little boy who is painting in art class. The teacher comes around and looks at the various creations and comes upon this boy who is painting away. She looks down and says, “What’s this?” He says, “I’m painting a picture of God.” The teacher says to him, “Come now, son, we don’t know what God is like.” The wee boy says, “Well, if you come back when I finish, you’ll have a better understanding.”

Twenty-first-century men and women are prepared to talk about God in the most remote terms, but when you get into it, they will say, “But we don’t know what God is like. We can’t know what God is like. At best we can have conjecture and hope.” But the doctrine of the incarnation, the fact that Jesus is the Godman, means we can discover who and what God is by looking at and listening

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to Jesus. When we take the characteristics of God and wonder, “What does that mean,” then we can look at the life of Jesus and begin to put it together.

The doctrine of the incarnation also means there was a time when Jesus was God but not man, but there was never a time when He was man but not God. That is another thought you might want to memorize. That is historical, biblical orthodoxy. It was taught to me as a small boy, and I am very grateful to have been taught it.

Paul says in Colossians 2:9, “For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.” The theologians speak of this in very clear terms. They use the mathematical terms of subtraction, division, and addition. In speaking of the incarnation, they say we do not have subtraction, because in becoming man, Jesus remained God. You might hear someone say, “We believe there was a divine Son who was co-eternal with the Father.” They might call him the Christ or the Son. “But,” they say, “the Jesus Christ of Nazareth wasn’t the same one as was eternal with the Father.” We need to reply to this. There is no subtraction in the incarnation. In becoming man, Jesus remained God.

There is no division in the incarnation. Jesus was

not split up and mixed up. He did not become a combination of God and man. A combination is mixed up. It is neither one thing nor the other. And some people's understanding of the incarnation is that Jesus somehow became all combined as part God and part man in this one person. That is not orthodoxy. Here is a statement to memorize: His deity was not humanized nor his humanity deified. In other words, He remained fully divine through His earthly life. He chose at times to limit His knowledge. He chose at times to do certain things, but He remained completely divine throughout all of His earthly life. We see that even in His death, because He just agreed to die. He said, "No one takes my life from me. I have the power to lay it down and I have the power to take it up again" (see John 10:18). Ordinary people have no option in the matter.

If the incarnation wasn't subtraction and it wasn't division, what was it? It was addition. Jesus became what He had not previously been—man—without ever ceasing to be what He had always been—God. He added humanity to His deity, and from then on He remained both God and man with two natures in one personality. This is a great wonder in the incarnation. In the doctrine of the

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Trinity, there is the amazing wonder of three distinct Persons in one unique Being. There is a distinction of persons; there is no distinction of *ousia* (the substance of God). Within the person of Jesus Christ, there is the distinction between His divinity and His humanity; two natures in one personality.

What Does It Matter?

Perhaps the most pressing question in all of this is, “What does it matter?” Thomas Carlisle once wrote, “If Arianism had won, Christianity would have dwindled to a legend.” Now, Arianism stemmed from a guy called Arius, who argued in the early centuries that there was a time when Jesus did not exist. Arius would disagree with John 1:1, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons, and Christian Scientists say the same thing as Arius. Thomas Carlisle was saying that if Arius had managed to convince the fourth-century world that there was a time when Jesus did not exist, that He was not the incarnate God, then by now Christianity would be like Greek and Roman mythology. It would have descended to a legend.

This is why it matters. If, in this New Age world in which we live, the Christian church does not affirm and reaffirm the centrality, the priority, the necessity, and the fundamental orthodoxy of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, then Christianity in Western culture will dwindle to a legend. We will become totally marginalized, and we will become absolutely irrelevant.

If you think this is an overstatement, then think of it this way: Doctors for years have told us we can live without our appendix. I still have mine, and I am planning on keeping it. It is very hard to get a Scotsman to give up very much that is as close to him as that, but I believe if you take it away, I'll still be around. If you take away my heart, I will not still be around. So you had better be sure that what you are planning on taking away is something you can live without.

Some argue that the incarnation is to Christianity what an appendix is to theologians. In other words, you can take it out and the body of Christianity will go on by itself. How do you answer that? By saying, "Let's look at the evidence and see whether the incarnation is an appendix or a heart." The very cursory glance we have given to the New

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Testament evidence makes it clear there is no way in the world we can regard it as an appendix.

C. S. Lewis says, “The doctrine of Christ’s divinity seems to me not something stuck on which you can unstick, but something that peeps out at every point so that you would have to unravel the whole web to get rid of it.” In other words, when you start to think realistically about Christianity, you cannot say, “Let’s take the incarnation and just put it over there, because frankly it doesn’t really matter. It’s not substantive to the issue.” When you start to examine Christianity, you come across it all the time. The very first verse of the book written by John, so people might come to believe in Jesus, hits us straight up with the incarnation. “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” That does not seem like an appendix, does it?

There are three important reasons why the incarnation matters. First of all, without the incarnation, we do not have God upon the cross. Just a man. If we have simply a man on the cross, how can we describe what happened on the cross as the New Testament describes it—a self-giving divine act demonstrating the love of God for

humanity? If it was just a man on a cross, then where is the significance of his death?

Liberal theologians may say, “The death of Jesus was to make a religious point, which will somehow or another enrich our spiritual lives.” How does the death of an ordinary Galilean peasant make a religious point which enriches my life? I don’t get it.

What does the Bible actually say? That it was God on the cross and He was redeeming sinners, and that only God could do it because only God is perfect, and that only man could do it because only man must pay. Since it must be God and it must be man, it can only be a Godman who could make an atoning sacrifice for sin. God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. Christ entrusted Himself into the care of His Father as He offered up His life an atonement for sin.

The average self-made man has no place for sin. He has clean fingernails and nicely starched cuffs. He does not need a savior, and so the incarnation is irrelevant to him. As soon as he decides he needs a savior, then he might be prepared to think about the incarnation. But for now, it is an appendix. Without the incarnation, we only have

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a man on the cross and no solution for sin.

Also without the incarnation, God is removed from all the pain and all the suffering of the world at its worst. Without the incarnation, God does not know about suffering experientially. So we have nothing to say to the Jew who reflects on the Holocaust. We have nothing to say to the mother who looks at the burning bodies of her children as she comes crashing down the road to find that in her momentary absence her children have been engulfed in flames and have been ushered into eternity. We have nothing to say to the person who lies increasingly gaunt, suffering from the encroachment of cancer. We have nothing at all to say if Jesus Christ is not the incarnate God. Because if He is not the incarnate God, what we have in Jesus is simply God's condolences through a representative. Without the incarnation, God does not enter in and share His people's sufferings.

Third, without the incarnation, Jesus has no permanent significance and no immediate benefit. Why is Jesus so important to the Christian faith here and now, some twenty centuries after His death? Because God assumed human nature; He came down to our time-space capsule. He

came historically, vitally, relevantly, and savingly. But if Jesus is not the incarnate God, we're forced to ask, "What importance and relevance does His teaching and lifestyle have for us today?" If Jesus is not the incarnate Son of God, why am I spending my life teaching the Bible? If Jesus is not the incarnate Son of God, why would anyone bother coming to church services? If Jesus Christ is not the incarnate Son of God, we are involved in the greatest con trick that the world has ever known, and we are living in the realm of total mythology.

Why would we pay attention twenty centuries later to a Jewish male carpenter like this Galilean peasant figure? Without the incarnation, there is no reason. After all, we live in a different cultural environment. Contemporary feminism argues, "Why should women be forced to listen to a male religious teacher culturally conditioned by the first century and the Greek and Roman world? They were all wrong." There is great validity in that question, if Jesus was not the incarnate Son of God. If He was not the incarnate Son of God, then He may be the historical point of departure for Christianity but He is not the anchor at the center of Christian faith for every generation.

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That, you see, is exactly what people are arguing today: Jesus is not who He claimed to be. We have voted him out. Therefore we can negate Him perfectly. However, if He is the incarnate Son of God, then He transcends all time barriers. He transcends all gender, He transcends all race, and He is abidingly, savingly significant. That is where we end up. This is not theological lumber.

People say to me, “You know, this is all kind of rarified stuff. Up there in the theological stratosphere.” But it is not. *Jesus Christ Superstar* arguably the most significant thing in the last fifty years in terms of a step forward from candy floss and “White Christmas”² stuff. It took us into an art form which merged thinking and philosophy with entertainment. In “The Gethsemane Song,” Jesus sings in prospect of His death. He is singing to His Father and saying things like,

I’m not [as] sure as when we started.
Then I was inspired, now I’m sad and tired.
Surely I’ve exceeded expectations.
Tried for three years, seems like thirty.
Could You ask as much from any other man?...
Why [I should] die?...
Show me just a little of Your omnipresent brain...

² Irving Berlin, “White Christmas” (1942).

Why [then] am I scared to finish what I started?
What You started. I didn't start it...
I will drink Your cup of poison.
Nail me to Your cross and break me
...before I change my mind.³

The song ends in a great orchestral swelling, rising chorus, and people look on and say, “Oh, what a dreadful thing that mean God did to Jesus.”

That is the implication of the view of the incarnation which is devoid of orthodoxy. If He is not the Godman, He is a bad man telling lies, or a madman living with delusion, but He is not a good man whom we can set aside at Christmas time and carry on with the apparently main business of Christianity—hanging lights and tinsel and buying presents with money we do not have for people we hardly know so they can take them back for a cash refund.

Why is it so important that you know about the incarnation of God? Because if Jesus is the person He claimed to be, you are going to meet Him. You are going to stand up and look right in His eyes. He is going to ask you, “When that Scottish joker did

³ Andrew Lloyd Webber and Sir Timothy Miles Bindon Rice, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, “Gethsemane Song” (1970).

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his best to explain why I came and why I died, why did you think you could brush it off and walk over and turn on the ballgame as if nothing matters?”

We can either bow at His feet and call Him Lord and God, or we can spit at Him and call Him a demon. But we cannot come to Him with any patronizing nonsense about His being a good man. He never left the option open to us. He never intended to. Today, if you hear God's voice, do not harden your heart.

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