

## IS JESUS GOD?

You have probably noticed that we are going over the same passages from Colossians but pulling out different themes to talk about. The first and second chapters of this letter are dense with comments that raise serious questions in our time. Paul does not deal with these issues in any thorough or careful way. He goes skipping over the surface so lightly that in some cases, like the so-called gnostic controversy, we aren't really sure *what* issues he's talking about. In all likelihood, the Colossian Christians *did* know what he was talking about, which means Paul could merely allude to the problems and move on.

Naturally Paul does talk about his favorite themes at times. And often we can tell from his comments what kinds of problems the Christians of various churches are facing. But Paul has no way of knowing that any of his letters will be saved, collected, or preserved. I doubt if it ever crossed his mind that there would one day be a "New Testament." In Paul's view, there isn't time; the close of the age is too near. So some of us sit with all his writings available and spread out before us, and that can be confusing as well as clarifying. Paul is not a systematic theologian. He is more of a "seat of your pants" kind of preacher/teacher. Paul is trying to deal with whatever the situation is at the moment, and there are lots of issues in real live churches needing attention all the time.

So, what if you know a third-grade teacher who spends considerable time out on the playground trying to keep a whole schoolyard full of kids happy and being nice to each other. Of course, along the way, little fights break out from time to time; somebody falls down and needs to be taken to the school nurse; eventually the bell rings and all the children need to get back to their classes. So there needs to be some order and there needs to be some freedom, and behind the scenes, all the children are wonderful, or at least full of great possibilities and potential.

Whether we notice or not, this teacher is working off of some very foundational premises: maybe respect for human life; some assumptions about forgiveness, new chances, and "love your neighbor"; patience is a virtue; and so forth. But what if we have a third party running around recording everything the teacher is saying, in every situation, to every student, and also recording what the students are saying back. Then

after a month or two, we splice all these recordings together, listen to all of it, and try to figure out from these very accurate records a clear, coherent, and consistent “philosophy of life” that this teacher is teaching the children.

You see, or at least I hope you see, that there is more than logic at work here. Some of it is instinct; some of it is relational caring; some of it is discernment about how the children will hear and respond in different ways and in different circumstances. And who knows, maybe the teacher will have different moods and emphasize a different awareness or different themes on different days. I suspect that Paul resembles that teacher a lot more than he does John Calvin or Karl Barth (two of the great systematic theologians).

But back to our question: Is Jesus God? Why does our question matter? Who cares whether or not Jesus was God? Or put another way: Even if we all care, does it matter whether we all agree about it? Why can't we all just be left alone to draw our own conclusions? I actually like that thought quite a bit. There is some strong evidence that this is precisely what Jesus' attitude was toward the question of His identity.

We have three major “western religions”: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. We have the vast majority of Christians claiming in no uncertain terms that Jesus was and is God. Therefore we constantly and deeply offend followers of both Judaism and Islam, who would die before saying or agreeing that any human being could possibly be God. “Sheer blasphemy and idolatry,” they would say. Nevertheless, we are assured that the creeds of Christendom claim that Jesus is God, and these creeds are in use by the vast majority of Christian churches, institutions, and schools still today. Of course, you will quibble; Christians always quibble. One version of the Apostles' Creed says “He ... sitteth on the right hand of God.” Does that cut off the circulation?

Nevertheless, the Apostles' Creed does not sound nearly as clear about equating Jesus to God as I am continually told. If Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, how can He be “from the beginning” and equal to the Holy Spirit or God? If He “sitteth on the right hand” and not on the throne itself, is that not a lesser place than God has? The Nicene Creed agrees that He “sitteth on the right hand of [God] the Father.” But it has already stated that He is “God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.” Clearly the two creeds do not agree.

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Did the Apostles' Creed come a little earlier, before the Christology had evolved into saying that Jesus was God?

Beyond the creeds is the Doctrine of the Trinity. "God in three persons, blessed Trinity." Is that not one of your favorite hymns? ("Holy Holy Holy") The Doctrine of the Trinity is sprinkled throughout your hymnals. "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" ended up being the claim that "the Son is God." In fact, many very fine Christians, theologians, pastors, and teachers will, with excellent cause and purpose, claim that the truest Christian name for God IS "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." This is more than a phrase, they say; it is the best name Christians have for God.

So why would I even ask this question? Do I not have enough problems on my plate? I deny the historicity of the virgin birth; tell you that the "Second Coming" is clearly a mistake; insist that the "fires of Hell" are a metaphor and burning all around us, not something to be feared in some distant realm. I encourage you to minimize Christmas and reclaim baptism; tell you with urgent pleas that Jesus' Message – backed by His life, death, and resurrection – is that God already has and always will love you personally, even if you don't believe everything rightly, say everything correctly, or do everything you are supposed to do and nothing you are not supposed to do. But now I want to make trouble over the Trinity – over the identity of Jesus? Hey, what's left? If we keep listening to Van Blair, will we not find all of Christianity disappearing into the mist?

I am so glad you asked that question! What if all that's left is the important stuff? Perhaps if we off-load the extraneous mistakes and sideshows, we can get more clear on, and know more powerfully than ever, what our faith is really about. What's left are Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter, Pentecost. What's left is real baptism – conversion – really wanting to know Jesus, and wanting to be true followers of Jesus. What's left is us being a genuine and intentional church in our own day and time. What's left is us being invited into Disciple Bands, just like Jesus' disciples/apostles were invited into such bands those many years ago.

I have some genuine animosity toward creedal approaches to our faith because creeds try to shut down honest inquiry, and creeds try to coerce people into believing things from the outside – meaning, whether they really believe them or not. I do not think this was Jesus' way. And

I do not think this leads toward newness of Life. I do not know Jesus' true identity. I certainly cannot explain Jesus' life, His teachings, His choices, His special awareness, His powers, His discipline, or His obedience by anything I know or expect from any other human being I have ever known or heard about. And I cannot explain His resurrection by anything familiar to me about normal life here on earth. So I do not know Jesus' true identity. I do know some things *about* Him, and there is much about Him that I can relate to. But every once in a while, His story jumps way beyond my radar screen – goes beyond any of my charts or expectations. There is a dimension of mystery around Jesus, no matter how carefully and conscientiously I study the records we have about Him.

So it is true that I do have some annoyance with people who act certain that they know everything there is to know about Jesus, even up to and including everything about His place in the heavenly realms. Myself, I haven't been there yet. So I don't know if He "sitteth on the right hand of God," or if He sitteth on the throne itself. Only, I'm pretty sure that the people who claim to know all about it haven't been there yet either. So why are they so sure and certain about such things – so certain, in fact, that they are willing to condemn or persecute or exclude anybody who doesn't agree with them?

If it pleases you to think that Jesus is God, well, perhaps that won't do a lot of harm if you stay humble about it. Humility, after all, is the highest virtue of the Christian Life; pride (being a "know it all" is only one of the attributes of pride) is king of the Seven Deadly Sins, and is Christendom's worst enemy, at least in the category of sins. Still, I do understand the logic. That is, Jesus doesn't fit into any of our normal understandings about human beings, so we tend to lift Him beyond normal earth definitions. But where does it end? It is already beyond our experience and understanding – already heading into the realms beyond – so if there is nothing to stop it, our musings end up going all the way to God. Except I think we need to keep remembering that, in actual fact, we have no idea what we are talking about. If we do not notice this but go on to make hard-core creeds out of things *despite* the fact that we have no idea what we are talking about, it is an open invitation for Satan to cause mayhem. And when it comes to burning people at the stake or excommunicating people from the church and then burning everything they have written so that nobody will ever know what they really believed or why, well, I consider things like that to be satanic mayhem.

Jesus commanded us to “love one another.” Why isn’t that in the Apostles’ Creed or the Nicene Creed? Jesus commanded us to love God first – in fact, if we do not love God, we cannot love our neighbor rightly because we do not know where they came from or how important they really are. But that isn’t in the Apostles’ Creed either, and it’s certainly not in the Nicene Creed.

Anyway, as people of *The New Church*, there are some things I think you should know. First of all, you should know that no author of any New Testament writings thought Jesus was God. That all came later, with fourth-century creeds. I am not naive enough to suppose that I can prove or conclude this topic in one sermon, but we don’t have to be in as much of a hurry as most churches do. So I don’t expect you all to agree very quickly. But no New Testament author believed that Jesus was God. Like Thumper, in *Bambi*, we made that part up later.

There are New Testament passages that are used in support of such a conclusion, of course. But unless you see them through the lens of the fourth-century Christological wars, you would not think they are saying that Jesus is God. Okay, here come the details. We will not get to nearly all the passages that might be used surrounding this question. And we will get to some Colossian comments, because that is where our studies are focused. If you missed hearing it this morning, we just read the important Colossian passages that are used to support the claim that Jesus is God.

First, a little warning. It is easy to jump to conclusions. We all think we speak English, so we hear a statement from an English translation of the Bible and think the meaning is clear and obvious. But as anybody who is married can tell you, often there is more than one way to hear and understand what seems at first to be a clear and obvious statement. Sometimes it turns out that where my mind is at the moment has much to do with how I hear a comment or a statement.

“*I and the Father are one.*” (John 10:30) Does this passage mean that Jesus and God are identical? Indeed, I have been in conversations with people who say: “There it is in black and white and in plain English. ‘I and the Father are one.’ Jesus is God; case closed. And if you don’t believe it, you are no true Christian.” Yes, well, I have been “no true Christian” so many times, for so many years, and for so many reasons that it has become difficult for me to whomp up any real interest or enthusiasm over it.

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The fact remains that in most places in John's Gospel, a very clear distinction is made between the Father and the Son. In this passage – "*I and the Father are one*" – are the two "one" in purpose, "one" in values and approaches, "one" in intention and integrity? In short, a single phrase is far from conclusive unless we are absolutely certain we understand it and its context. "*The two shall become one*" is a famous biblical passage about marriage, but I know no sane person who assumes that this means a husband and a wife are identical or indistinguishable, or that one day they in fact will be the same person. This past Friday was our 55th wedding anniversary, and I like that very much! But I can promise you that Mariana and I are still two very different people. It is true that we agree more often, care about more of the same things, and feel closer on many levels than I ever thought possible in my younger days. So the passage is both true and not factual – at the same time.

We could go to countless passages which make it clear that Jesus prays to God, obeys God, honors God, attributes His own ministry and powers to God. Jesus in His own life is not pointing to Himself, but always to God. So I will and do claim that notions of Jesus *being* God would have annoyed and offended Jesus greatly. The implications of this, I believe, are huge and somewhat devastating in juxtaposition to our usual uses of the Doctrine of the Trinity. In my own view, it is clear that Jesus *reveals* God. This still puts His true identity beyond any precision definitions or normal comprehensions on our part. But Jesus can reveal God without *being* God. And I think concepts of the Trinity, before they were turned into a doctrine (a test of faith), were useful in the Christian community for distinguishing between the sources of our experiences and encounters. Were we talking about what we thought we had learned from prayer (our encounters with the Holy Spirit); or from pondering the life of Jesus; or from our awareness of the Creator God? On that level, I appreciate the Trinity very much.

In any case, Paul sometimes waxes very poetic, and his opinions about Jesus (from the Damascus Road, of course) are very high. Paul can be quite adamant about all the claims to authority all around him that try to be greater than the authority of Jesus. (Moses, the principalities and powers, Satan, death itself – nothing outranks Jesus!) But Paul is nevertheless very clear in numerous places that Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God, but not God himself. Just one passage to illustrate. And you will notice that it is not just one phrase, handy for proof-texting, but comes in a much larger context.

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*“But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For ‘God has put all things in subjection under his feet.’ But when it says, ‘all things are put in subjection,’ it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.” (I Corinthians 15:20–28 (ESV))*

Of course, Paul is not *trying* to answer our question. Equating Jesus to God would never have occurred to him. He answers us “in passing” – that is, he is talking about the resurrection, and his answer to our question comes out without any intention on his part of addressing our question.

Therefore we have every right and reason to hear Paul’s comments in his letter to the Colossians in a truer context. Colossians is not an essay about Jesus being God, and it is not a debate in the context of the Nicene Creed. Paul has been told by Epaphras that the Colossian church is struggling with some influences in the community that are telling people that they must pay more attention to the angels, to dietary laws, and to a number of other forces of nature (elemental powers) that are surrounding them. Some of the Christians at Colossae are getting quite concerned about what they are being told, and fearful of what will happen to them if they do not pay heed.

So Paul is eloquent in reply. Jesus is greater and more powerful than all these other forces they are starting to worry about. Jesus is “*the image of the invisible God.*” He is firstborn from the dead. In Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. In Him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily. The Colossians have nothing to fear; they could not be in a safer place than to be in the presence and protection of Jesus. If we read it carefully, without filters from Nicaea, Paul’s claims for Jesus are high indeed, but they are not equating Jesus with God. In fact, Paul concludes his arguments by saying that God is the true source of it all. We will be buried with Jesus and raised with Him too, but the real source of all power – including the power of Jesus – is God himself. What are the

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Colossians really trusting? “*The powerful working of God, who raised Jesus from the dead.*” Did you catch that? If it is God who raised Jesus from the dead, then Jesus is not God. Jesus was raised by God.

So if we really want to hear the Colossian letter, what are we hearing? We are not hearing that Jesus is God. But we probably should be hearing that Jesus is more powerful and more important than a lot of other things we are starting to trust, or fear – things or people that do not have real authority anywhere close to what Jesus has. Do you know any voices, teachings, or sources of hope or success – or scenarios that frighten you or discourage you – that you have been listening to with more attention than you are giving to Jesus in your life? “Who, us? Oh Bruce! How could you even think such a thing?!”

The problem with recognizing Jesus’ true authority is that it always turns us back to remembering and recognizing *God’s* true authority. And when we turn again to trusting God’s true authority because Jesus has reminded us and revealed it to us, we are inevitably reminded also that God truly and deeply loves us. That has a serious tendency to throw our fears and our guilt and our shame right back out the window. You want to throw something into the fires of Hell? Well and good! Throw your fear and guilt and despair and discouragement into the fire. Let the fire burn something we really have no more use for.