

THE DEITY OF JESUS

LESSON 1 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

At a critical point in His final year of ministry, Jesus asked His disciples an all-important question: “Who do people say that I am?” (Mark 8:27). Without knowing it, the disciples were being asked one of the most defining and dividing questions of all history. Who is Jesus of Nazareth? Many answers have been given to this question over the past 2,000 years. Without a doubt, Jesus has been the most significant, history-changing person to have ever lived. Even those who do not believe in Him cannot escape His mark on the world. We still count our years based on the year of His birth. But who was He?

In Jesus’ own lifetime, there were already several answers to that question. The disciples responded: “Some say John the Baptist; and others Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets” (Matt 16:14). At the very least, in His lifetime, no one believed Jesus was ordinary. His words and works spoke for themselves. There was something more to this man. Could He be John the Baptist back from the dead? Or Elijah come back? There had to be some way to account for the miraculous nature of His life. Very few though in the lifetime of Jesus were willing to go all the way and assert that He was actually God Himself incarnate.

The same is true for most other worldviews of the past 2,000 years. If that same question was asked today, “Who do people say that I am?” what kind of responses would it elicit?

The Jew would say that Jesus was just a man, a rabbi who claimed to be the messiah, but was false and was crucified.

The Muslim would also say that Jesus was a man. But in addition, He was a true prophet of Allah, under Muhammad of course. However, Jesus was not the Son of God, He did not die on a cross, and He did not rise from the dead.

The Buddhist would say that Jesus was an enlightened man and a wise teacher.

The Hindu would likewise say that Jesus was a holy man and wise teacher. They may even accept Jesus as *a* god, one of many *ishtas* or forms of the divine, which humans can attain, but not the one God of heaven.

The Jehovah's Witness would say that Jesus was God's son, meaning the first creation of God. Jesus is a created being and not almighty God Himself. That said, Jesus is the highest being, the chief of the angels, who is also known as the archangel Michael, God's representative.

The Mormon would say that Jesus is the literal Son of God, being the product of God the Father and Mary through sexual relations. He was not virgin born. Jesus was a preexistent spirit, the spirit brother of the devil, and all humans can attain to such divinity. He later married Mary, Martha, and another Mary.

The Christian Scientist would say that Jesus is not God, but a great man who was inspired by the idea of a messiah. He did not die on the cross though or pay for anyone's sins.

Finally, the atheist would say that Jesus was merely a wise moral teacher. Others though might say that Jesus never even existed. He is a fabrication of history, used to control the masses.

The one thing all these different views of Jesus have in common is that they see Jesus as less than purely divine. Jesus is not God in flesh. He may be a son of God, but not in any sense that would make Him fully God Himself. And this forms one of the fundamental distinctions between Christianity and all other faiths, for Christians believe that although taking on a human nature, Jesus is additionally fully God. He is the son of God, God incarnate, of the same essence as God.

This was Peter's answer to Christ's question of "Who do people say that I am?" Peter responded, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt 16:16). According to Jesus, this is the right response, the response of faith in Him. And such a response to Jesus doesn't come from the flesh or human wisdom, but from God Himself. And so Jesus says to Peter: "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven" (Matt 16:17).

It is this testimony of God the Father concerning Jesus the Son passed on through the apostles in Scripture to us that forms the foundation of the church. So Jesus continues: "I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it" (Matt 16:18). The bedrock or foundation of the church to which Jesus refers here is Peter's confession. The belief that Jesus is the divine messiah is the cornerstone of the Christian faith. Without His divinity, there is no salvation or redemption possible.

It is understandable that those in the world and those of other faiths do not want to believe in Jesus as fully God. For if Jesus was fully God, then everything He said must be true. That's a problem though, because Jesus condemned the world. He placed demands on the world to repent. And He claimed to be the exclusive path to salvation. Such claims the world desperately does not want to accept.

However, what matters most is not what Christians or non-Christians believe or want to believe about Jesus. What matters most is what the Bible actually says about Him. What is the biblical testimony regarding the deity of Jesus?

Is there evidence of His divinity? Is there proof? Or is the concept of Jesus as fully God simply an invention of the early church, created as a means of controlling people? This study aims to find out.

The goal of this series is to study the Scriptures to see what they say concerning the deity of Jesus. More specifically, the goal is to display how the Bible does indeed clearly and convincingly display Jesus to be fully God. The Bible leaves no room for doubt and the belief that Jesus is God's true Son is rightly a non-negotiable, fundamental belief.

This does not mean all will believe or submit to this truth. Indeed, personal acceptance must still be granted by God the Father in heaven. And individuals must still approach Jesus by faith, since unlike Thomas they cannot touch His hands or His side. But this series aims to show that this is not a blind faith or a faith against reason. The belief that Jesus is divine fully and squarely rests on the clear, consistent, and comprehensive testimony of Scripture.

As such, the deity of Jesus must be believed. This is an essential truth. It is part of the entrance exam into the true church, so to speak, for to get the person of Jesus wrong is to get the work of Jesus wrong. To get the work of Jesus wrong is to get the gospel wrong. To get the gospel wrong is to get salvation wrong. And the result is that a person is still lost and dead in their sins. Truly, getting the humanity and deity of Jesus right is essential and this study aims to settle the latter.

A PREVIEW OF THE DEITY OF JESUS

Now with this introduction in mind, we can give a preview of how this study of Christ's deity will be organized. To start, we will see that the deity of Jesus is found in His DNA. This is another way of saying that:

Jesus possesses the DEEDS of deity
Jesus possesses the NAMES of deity
Jesus possesses the ATTRIBUTES of deity

We will find that Jesus performs God's works, He is called by God's names, and He shares God's characteristics. This is already outstanding evidence that Jesus is divine, not to mention the several times where the New Testament outright says Jesus is God. But this isn't all.

In addition, we will also look at the CLAIMS and WORSHIP of Jesus. Several times, Jesus Himself clearly claimed to be God in the flesh. Also, several times, Jesus wasn't just identified as God—He was worshipped as God. Even if Jesus was the highest angel, this would be utterly blasphemous.

Altogether, the biblical testimony is crystal clear. Put together the DNA + CLAIMS & WORSHIP of Jesus and you arrive at His deity. Over the next several weeks, we will look at these five categories and build the biblical case for Jesus as God.

With the rest of our time in this introduction though, we want to spend some time and trace the belief in Jesus as God through church history. By way of introduction, this will already go to show that the deity of Jesus was not an invention of the church, but that Christians have held to this essential truth from the days of the apostles onward.

A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE DEITY OF JESUS

How as the church historically understood the deity of Jesus? Liberals like the idea that the church invented the doctrine of the deity of Jesus in the 4th century at the Council of Nicaea. This belief was made popular by the relatively recent book/film *The Da Vinci Code*. As the Roman Empire became Christianized, the emperor needed a way to control the masses and unify them. He then assembled a council of all the bishops to push Jesus as God on the church as a means of control and so Jesus was declared to be God by a “narrow vote” in the 4th century, forever changing history.

This rendering of events is patently false though. The Roman Empire did become Christianized in the 4th century and there was an important church council, but the truth and facts are completely skewed and altered in this account.

Instead, what is the true historical background of the deity of Jesus? Here, we aim to give an accurate historical perspective to this entire study of the deity of Jesus. To do so, first, we will trace what the early church believed about Jesus. We will display that overwhelmingly, the early church fathers long before the Council of Nicaea believed Jesus was God. This truth was not an invention of the 4th century, but was believed from the apostles onward. Then, second, we will look at what the Council of Nicaea was really about and what declarations were made by the church there and why.

Church Fathers on the Deity of Jesus

Of primary concern here are the Ante-Nicaean fathers, which means all the early church leaders *before* the Council of Nicaea in AD 325. What did these early leaders, writers, and apologists believe about the deity of Jesus? The early church fathers were a diverse group. There were the Greek fathers from the east, who wrote in Greek and were influenced by Greek philosophy. These often had differences with the Latin fathers of the west. But when it comes to the deity of Jesus, there is remarkable consistency across the ancient church that He was God.

This belief traces back to the earliest fathers, many of whom were themselves disciples of the apostles (e.g. Ignatius, Polycarp). Most of these early church writers could trace their spiritual heritage directly back to the apostles and thereby to Jesus Himself. Hence, their writings, while not Scripture or on the same level as Scripture, may be taken as echoes of apostolic teaching.

Along these lines, here are ten quotes of early church fathers, all dating before the Council of Nicaea, which affirm Jesus as God¹:

1. Ignatius (AD 105): “God Himself being manifested in human form.”
2. Clement (AD 150): “It is fitting that you should think of Jesus Christ as of God.”
3. Justin Martyr (AD 160): “The Father of the universe has a Son. And He . . . is even God.”
4. Irenaeus (AD 180): “He is God, for the name Emmanuel indicates this.”
5. Tertullian (AD 200): “Christ our God.”
6. Origen (AD 225): “And as no one ought to be offended, seeing God is the Father, that the Savior is also God.”
7. Novatian (AD 235): “He is not only man, but God also.”
8. Cyprian (AD 250): “Let us assuredly, as far as we can, please Christ our Lord and God.”
9. Methodius (AD 290): “He truly was and is, being in the beginning with God, and being God.”
10. Lactantius (AD 304): “We believe Him to be God.”

An additional 25 lengthy quotes of Ante-Nicene fathers attesting their belief in the deity of Jesus can be found here:

Busenitz, Nathan. "Did the Early Church Affirm Jesus' Deity?" The CrippleGate. September 05, 2013. <http://thecripplegate.com/did-the-early-church-affirm-jesus-deity>.

It's true that the early church was a diverse group and we're not saying they had unanimous views of all things. However, any notion that the doctrine of the deity of Jesus was invented later in church history is bogus. The contention that this belief was contrived and forced upon the church in the 4th century is nonsense. One fact is clear beyond doubt, namely that there exists a continuous chain of early church leaders who believed in Jesus as God from the time of the apostles onward.

¹ All quotes are taken directly from: Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, editors, *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volumes I-IX*, electronic edition (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994). This collection of quotes was found in an online article: Chaffey, Tim. "How Should Christians View the Fact Claims of The Da Vinci Code?" Answers in Genesis. May 17, 2011. <https://answersingenesis.org/reviews/books/how-christians-should-view-the-fact-claims-of-the-da-vinci-code>.

The Arian Controversy and Council of Nicaea

Again, we are not suggesting that everyone in the early church believed the same thing. There will always be those who believe what they want to believe and teach what they want to teach. Many little heresies sprung up in the first few centuries of the church, with a few groups denying the deity of Jesus. But the biggest challenge to the belief in Jesus as God came in the 4th century AD.

Alexandria, Egypt had developed into one of the major centers of Christianity. There, a presbyter named Arius clashed with Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria. Arius expressed views against the deity of Jesus. Because of these views, Alexander removed Arius from his church post. Arius appealed to the people and other churches though, so this local debate spread to many cities. This threatened the unity of the church at large in a time when unity was of the utmost importance.

After the Edict of Milan in AD 313, Christianity was now favored in the Roman Empire. Emperor Constantine began unifying his large and diverse empire under the banner of Christianity and the last thing he wanted was controversy that would divide the church. Since this controversy had spread to many cities, Constantine wanted it settled. So he eventually called on bishops from all over the empire to gather and resolve the issue. Constantine didn't have a horse in the race, so to speak. He just wanted unity.

Well this Council took place in Nicaea in AD 325. It was attended by 318 bishops. Arius was in attendance to defend his views. What exactly was Arius teaching about Jesus? In short, here is a summary of Arius' teaching, which denied the deity of Jesus:

- God was not always a Father; there was a time when He was God all alone
- Accordingly, there was a time when the Son did not exist
- The Son was later created by God out of nothing
- The Son is therefore a creature; He is not God or part of the Godhead
- The Son does have the highest rank of any creature; He is higher than angels and man; but He is a creature nonetheless
- All passages in the Bible where Jesus is seemingly referred to as divine are explained away by honorific and metaphorical language; such exalted language shows Christ's superior rank among other creatures, not that He is of the same essence as the Father

As we have already seen, such a view of Jesus was not the norm among early church fathers. The deity of Jesus was seen as “orthodox” since the time of the apostles. The most notable defender of the orthodox view during this time was Athanasius. He too attended the Council of Nicaea. There, Athanasius made two significant contributions in support of the deity of Jesus. He argued that:

- 1) No creature can redeem other creatures. Only God can redeem His creation. If Jesus were a creature, He could not redeem human beings. So in other words—only God saves, yet Jesus saves, therefore Jesus is God.
- 2) Worship and prayer belong to God alone, not any creature. Yet Jesus is prayed to and worshipped. Therefore Jesus is God.

The council lasted two months where views and arguments were heard from both sides. At first, out of 318, only 22 bishops came in support of Arius. But when his writings were read out loud, they were denounced as blasphemous by most. In the end, when all testimony and arguments were heard and the Scriptures were studied, all 318 bishops were in agreement that Jesus was God, except for Arius and two of his close followers. Does this sound like a “narrow vote” as *The Da Vinci Code* would have people believe? All of the bishops then signed the Nicene Creed, which expressed the deity of Jesus and was meant to end the debate.

Clearly though, the deity of Jesus wasn’t invented by the Council of Nicaea. It was simply defended and upheld. The debate was settled as far as the church at large is concerned.

We must clarify that church history is not gospel. Church creeds are not inspired. Our source of authority is not tradition or the views of the fathers, but Scripture alone. We don’t believe anything today because it was voted on by a majority. We don’t believe in the deity of Jesus because of the Council of Nicaea. We believe in the deity of Jesus because it is taught clearly in Scripture. The same goes for all beliefs.

If this is the case, what is the value of studying church history like this? Like we said before, church history gives perspective on the issues and heresies we face today. For instance, as we will see later, Jehovah’s Witnesses’ views on Jesus are basically a recycling of the Arian heresy. Like Ecclesiastes says, nothing is new under the sun.

Additionally, studying church history is encouraging, for we are assured that even though our beliefs do not rest on men, our beliefs can be traced back historically all the way to the apostles. When it comes to the deity of Jesus, we can trace a continuous line of belief all the way back to Jesus Himself.

At the end of the day though, this historical background on the deity of Jesus settles nothing for us. It does not end the debate for us. We are not primarily concerned with what others have thought. We are concerned with what the Bible says. Therefore this historical background merely sets up and frames our future discussion. What does the Bible say about the deity of Jesus? We will start to find out next time.