

“Was Jesus a Christian?”

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The ‘Jesus’ Question

‘Who was Jesus?’ is the oldest issue for all Christians. Through recent centuries many religious groups have co-opted and defined Jesus after their image. For a good number, Jesus is a only prophet or teacher. The cults and sects have distinguished themselves by the identity they have given to Jesus. The Jehovah’s Witnesses say Jesus is a great angel. The Latter Day Saints believe, in essence, that Jesus is a highly evolved human.

A number of books catalog the varieties of images of Jesus in the last century. One book by Jon A. Buell & O. Quentin Hyder, addresses several major images in his book entitled *Jesus: God, Ghost, or Guru?* John Wick Bowman, who wrote *Which Jesus?* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, n.d.] uses his chapters to reflect the many modern images attached to Christ: 1) Apocalyptic Son of Man; 2) Existentialist Rabbi; 3) Essene-Like Teacher; 4) Nazorean Scheming Messiah; 5) Para-Zealot Revolutionary. Ken Samples, of Augustine Fellowship, conducts lectures on the subject: *Jesus Christ - Man, Menace, Madman, Myth, Mystic or Messiah?* Who Jesus is appears to be a complex subject.

It would seem to go without saying that of all the speculation the one thing we can be certain of is that Jesus was a Christian. After all, isn’t He where we get the idea of what it means to be a Christian? Or is it? Maybe we need to stop and think about that very carefully. One recent book *This Jesus: Martyr, Lord, Messiah*, asks a very penetrating and germane question: “Was Jesus a Christian?” Most people would say “Yes” without hesitation. Let me say, the answer you give will tell much about your understanding of the Gospel. It will tell significant things about your theology, your understanding about God,

Sin, Humanity, and Salvation. I will not wait to the end to give you the answer. I will let the cat out of the bag now and say that the resounding answer is NO! “How could you dare say that Jesus was not a Christian”, you may ask. The immediate answer is found in understanding the Person of Christ. Two things about His Person make it *impossible* for Him to be a Christian.

Jesus Was a Jew

The first thing the Bible tells us about Jesus is that he was *incarnate*. This incarnation means to be fully human in every sense - without sin. But he was a *particular* kind of man. He was Jewish. He participated in Jewish piety: circumcision and temple sacrifice. He approved tithing (Mt 23:23). He sacrificed at the Temple (Mk 12:41-44). He said grace before meals (Mk 6:41). He appealed to Mosaic purity laws. He wore a *talit* (‘prayer shawl’ required by the Law of Moses - Mt 9:20; Num 15:37-39). He claimed to come only for the “lost sheep of the house of Israel”. He never did anything that showed he rejected being a Jewish person.

Jesus was a perfect Jew. He did not break the Law of Moses or of God. It may appear that he broke the Law when he disregarded certain oral traditions. Many of the violations of the Law of which Jesus’ opponents accused him were not so real in fact. Jesus never disobeyed a directive of the Law of Moses or of God. More than that, He never failed to keep even the spirit of the Law. What he violated were known as ‘hedge laws’ of Judaism. They were invented by humans. The idea behind the hedge laws was to set up rules which would keep one from the possibility - or even appearance - of violating the Law of Moses. To the shock of the Jewish religious leaders, Christ broke these in order to show himself Lord over all man-made traditions and laws.

Jesus was totally obedient to God in everything. (Rom. 5:19; Heb. 5:8) He loved God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength (Mark. 12:30). Yes, He lived by faith. But, He did not live by faith alone. He lived by works as well (John 17:4). Where all the sacrifices required by Moses failed, the perfect obedience of Christ succeeded. Jesus was perfect in obedience and works. He did not sin! This makes him fundamentally different from every Christian and for that matter every Jew or Gentile on the face of the earth and for all human history.

Much more than merely being a “nice” person who loved everyone and who did good things for people, Jesus was the *only perfect human* who every lived. He did what everyone from Adam through Moses to David failed to do. (Rom. 5:18,19) He pleased God in every way. (John 5:30, 8:29) He was totally accepted by God *through* works and not by grace. He did not need a mediator but he *merited* the right to Heaven through his own life and righteousness. Because of this, God accepted him as righteous, delivered him from death and the grave, and exalted him to the highest place in Heaven.

This is much different from being a Christian. Christians are those who realize they are not perfect (Rom 3:10-18), have broken the Law of God (Rom 2:23), and must have grace in order to be accepted by God. Christians understand that they cannot trust in their own obedience to be right with God, (Rom 3:20) but must place their faith in a mediator to bring them to God and Heaven (Rom 3:22-25). Therefore, Jesus could not be a ‘Christian’ in any biblical sense.

He Was God

The second reason Jesus was not a Christian is even more important. Jesus was God. This truth is expressed by many statements of Scripture. “*In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.*” (Jn. 1:1) He said, “*I and the Father are one.*” (Jn 10:30) “*Great is the mystery of godliness . . . God was manifest in the flesh.*” (1 Tim 3:6) Jesus was the Incarnation of God. “*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.*” (Luke 1:35) “*The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.*” (John 1:14)

Because Jesus was God, his fundamental nature was not sinful. He was by nature HOLY. All of us are sinful by nature. Christ was Holy by nature. Therefore, Jesus was not in need of salvation from a sinful nature (Heb. 7:26, 27). However, Christians, being part of the sinful human race, recognize their need of salvation. (Heb. 10:1-3) Thus, Christ could not have been a Christian. Jesus was not a Christian because he was by nature the Incarnation of the Holy God, and he lived the life of a perfect Jew. All people, let alone all Christians need to be saved by God. Jesus did not need to be “saved”. Even concerning his

death he said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” He confidently claimed to be “I AM” and the very “resurrection and the life.”

The Basic Misunderstanding

A number of Christian people in the 19th century turned from believing doctrinal truth and tried to make Christianity into a religion of being good, kind and/or doing right things. They did this because they feared the Bible could not stand up to the higher criticism of the Enlightenment rationalist and other skeptics of the Faith. Higher criticism attacked the historicity of the events of Scripture, especially the Resurrection of Christ. However, liberal Christians still wanted to hold onto the Jesus they grew up believing in. They made a fatal mistake. They assumed that **being like** Jesus is what makes you a Christian.

“But”, you say, “aren’t we try to be like Jesus? Aren’t we to be nice?” Yes. “Aren’t we to good things?” Yes. “Aren’t we to be moral and do the right things?” Yes. “Should we not give our kids WWJD bracelets?” Not if you understand what Jesus did, and also what it means to be a real Christians. You see, we don’t become a Christian by all these moral actions. Personal morality and self-righteousness are not the cause of our salvation or ‘Christianity’; they are the results of our salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. Good works reveal and express the new life unconditional and sovereignly instigated by God. They are the fruit. Once you get the “tree,”(Christ by faith) the fruit is free (personal holiness and morality and this comes by personal effort). Fruit does not come first, by itself. It comes after the tree is planted and does its work. Personal morality grows from being rooted in Christ. The fruit comes from resting in Him and Him alone.

The Gospel

Being a Christian means trusting in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Gospel is not about trying to be like Jesus. It can’t be because He wasn’t even a “Christian.” He was far more than that! He was a perfectly devout Jew. He was sinless. Even more, He was the holy God incarnate. We are not. We are sin incarnate. If we could have been like Him we

would not have needed Him to save us. But, we are *far* from like Him and *will be* until He changes our vile body to that like His glorious body.

The Gospel is the Good News that Jesus’ though perfect God and perfect Jew, died for our sins, so that we, by looking to him and trusting in him, could receive his righteousness and holiness. We become Christians through the shed blood of Jesus and his resurrection from death. We can never be totally like Jesus, any more than we can create the Universe or walk on water. We can only trust in the wonderful, marvelous miracle of Jesus’ redemption. And in our Christian life we can only trust in His grace to transform us progressively, substantially - but only partially - into His likeness. Even this will not be completed until His Second Coming.

The Apostle Paul’s revolutionary understanding of the Gospel was based on his revolutionary understanding of faith:

In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked **in him** with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession-- to the praise of his glory. (Eph. 1:11-14) NIV

He believed and preached that through faith the believer was considered *in* Christ by God. Being a Christian means being *in* Christ not merely *like* Christ. We are not accepted by God and received into Heaven by being copies. We are brought into the one and only real, authentic Christ by faith in Him. How inferior to try to be *like* Christ when one can be *in* Christ. To be accepted of God we must be included in Christ, because Christ is the One who is completely accepted by God. If we were to be *like* Christ only and not *in* Christ, we would be more like a poor clone or pale imitation of the only truly perfect, sinless, and holy God made flesh to ransom Humanity. Thank God there is something much better. All who trust in Jesus are *in* Christ. And this miracle is all to His glorious praise!