

What Then Shall I Do With Jesus?

by Charles Leiter

It is perhaps appropriate that the words of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, spoken so shortly before the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, should serve as a title for this tract nearly two thousand years later. (Mt 27:22) The situation faced by Pilate and that faced by every one of us is, after all, much the same: What shall we do with this troublesome person named Jesus? For us, as for Pilate, there is no escape from the dilemma; we cannot avoid making a decision of some sort.

Pilate felt uneasy about Jesus. It was obvious that the religious leaders had delivered Him up out of envy, and that He had committed no crimes worthy of death. Also, there was a mysterious aura about this Man who conducted Himself with such calmness and authority, who made no answer to the false charges leveled against Him, and who spoke of a “kingdom not of this world”. And, on top of all this, Pilate’s wife had received a distinct premonition to the effect that he should have nothing to do with Jesus. Yet, despite his inward sense of the injustice and wrongness of it all, Pilate soon succumbed to the pressures of the mob and delivered up the holiest of all men to the shameful death of the cross. (Mt 27:11-26; Lk 23:20; J n 18:33-38)

It is our hope that some who read these lines will turn from following in the steps of Pilate. Instead of seeking to crucify Jesus afresh in their own hearts, they will acknowledge Him as their Lord and God.

The Four Alternatives

We must point out, first of all, that to be “just neutral” toward Jesus Christ is impossible. Jesus Himself made this very clear. “He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters.” (Mt 12:30)

Either we will be among those who love and follow Jesus or among those who hate and seek to destroy Him; there is no middle ground. The situation has often been summed up by Christian apologists in terms of four options. On the one side, we acknowledge Jesus as the Truth. On the other side, we refuse to acknowledge His claims and thus automatically affirm (though perhaps without realizing it) that we believe Him to be either a liar, a lunatic, or a legend.

The reasons for this should be clear: Jesus of Nazareth made claims for Himself that are absolutely unparalleled among the religious leaders of the world. He claimed the power to forgive sins and the right to receive worship from His fellow men. He demanded absolute devotion to Himself and promised men divine gifts such as peace and life. He claimed to be the unique Son of God and said that He would come in power and great glory at the end of the world to judge all men. He taught His own sinlessness and moral perfection. He put forward His teachings as absolutely authoritative, saying that even His very words were directly from God. He claimed to be the Light and Savior of the whole world... Thus, when we reject the truth of Jesus’ words, we are left with few alternatives as to His true nature. A man who claimed to be all that Jesus claimed to be and yet was not, must have been either a deliberate deceiver, a psychotic, or a myth—all other possibilities are, at most, only combinations of these three. Yet, each of these “possibilities” is so impossible as to demand refutation only because of the hardness of men’s hearts.

1. LIAR

Jesus claimed to be God, but knew He was not.

For any who have read the gospel account of Jesus' words and deeds with real moral understanding, the mere mention of this "possibility" is a sufficient refutation of it. The integrity of Christ is beyond question. Even the Irish historian Lecky recognized that "the character of Jesus has not only been the highest pattern of virtue, but the strongest incentive to its practice, and has exerted so deep an influence, that it may be truly said, that the simple record of three short years of active life has done more to regenerate and to soften mankind, than all the disquisitions of philosophers and than all the exhortations of moralists." The ethical teachings of Jesus were lofty beyond compare and His own character a paragon of moral excellence. He hated and denounced hypocrisy in others and was transparently sincere and guileless Himself. He spoke of the devil as "the father of lies" (Jn 8:43-45) and said that His purpose for coming into the world was to "bear witness to the truth" (Jn 18:36-37). "If it were not so, I would have told you," He assured His disciples. (Jn 14:1-2)

Surely there is no room here for the idea that Jesus based His whole life and teachings upon "a colossal lie as to His real nature;" (Montgomery) The novels, films, and record albums which have come forth in recent years portraying Jesus in a twisted fashion tell us nothing about the Christ of history, but they do tell us a great deal about the terrible moral sickness of our own generation. All who thus fly in the face of moral sanity and choose to conjure up a perverted Christ or a "passover plot", border perilously near to the "unpardonable sin" of which Jesus spoke. Even in His day, there were those who felt the pressure of God's Spirit upon them, and, knowing that they were in the presence of Goodness Incarnate, yet chose to attribute everything to the devil. (Mk 3:22-30)

2. LUNATIC

Jesus believed Himself to be God, but in reality He was not.

There are many in our day who manifest delusions of grandeur, thinking themselves to be God—or Napoleon. They are rightly classed as insane, deranged, unbalanced. Yet Jesus made claims for Himself that are no less extravagant than those made by many who are at this moment patients in psychiatric wards. As J.W. Montgomery put it, "I know that you would immediately summon the men in the white coats if I seriously made the claims for myself that Jesus did." Nevertheless, the "possibility" that Jesus was deluded is quite easily disposed of. It is so transparently foolish that it too bears its refutation on its face. (Jn 10:20-21!) "Is such an intellect—clear as the sky, bracing as the mountain air, sharp and penetrating as a sword, thoroughly healthy and vigorous, always ready and always self-possessed—liable to a radical and most serious delusion concerning his own character and mission? Preposterous imagination!" (Schaff) Once understand the parables of this great Teacher, once observe His perfect life, or get a feel for His composure and balance under pressure, or listen to the answers He gives when under interrogation, and this option is definitely out! If only we were as sane as Jesus!

But let us note the sharpness of the dividing line: Either Jesus is the Son of God as He claimed, or else a psychotic. C.S. Lewis said it well: "The discrepancy between the depth and sanity and (let me add) shrewdness of His moral teaching and the rampant megalomania which must lie behind His theological teaching unless He is indeed God, has never been satisfactorily got over."

3. LEGEND

Jesus never really claimed to be God; the words attributed to Him were actually invented by others.

This final “possibility”, held in a somewhat foggy fashion by multitudes of unbelieving college students, has nothing more to commend it than the previous two. In reality, it too needs only to be stated in order to be perceived as false. Once again, those who have gazed with comprehension upon the Person portrayed in the gospel records know that He is entirely beyond the scope of human invention. “A character so original, so complete, so uniformly consistent, so perfect, so human and yet so high above all human greatness, can be neither a fraud nor a fiction. The poet, as has been well said, would in this case be greater than the hero. It would take more than a Jesus to invent a Jesus.” (Schaff) In the words of Gresham Machen, “The Jesus of the Gospels is certainly not the product of invention or of myth; He is rooted too deep in historical conditions; He towers too high above those who by any possibility could have produced Him.” (Emphasis ours.) What an insult to the Lord of glory to suggest that He is nothing more than the cardboard fabrication of a group of feverish religious fanatics!

Furthermore, the idea often held that enthusiastic followers of Jesus in the second and third centuries began to trump up His greatness and put words in His mouth that He would have been shocked to hear, cannot stand in the light of historical investigation. The evidence that the biographies of Christ were written within the lifetime of His contemporaries is now so strong that even the late William F. Albright. was brought to the opinion that “every book of the New Testament was written by a baptized Jew between the forties and the eighties of the first century A.D. (very probably sometime between about 50 and 75 A.D.).” (Until his death in 1971, Dr. Albright was considered to be easily the foremost of American biblical archaeologists. It is significant that he came to these conclusions in spite of his somewhat “liberal” view of the Bible.)

Think of it! It was during the lifetime of hundreds of those who had seen and heard Him that the earliest biographies of Jesus were written. (Jesus was crucified about A.D. 30.) For a mere myth about Christ, in the form of the gospel, manufactured out of thin air and having no relation to reality, to have gained the acceptance of the early Christians when so many eyewitnesses were still among them, is incredible.

Besides, Jesus was a singularly poor candidate for deification. In order for the Jews of His day to have elevated Him to the status of Messiah against His own wishes, there would necessarily have been some correlation between Jesus and the stereotyped “Messiah” that people were expecting to appear. The opposite is in fact true. To quote Montgomery again, “Historically it can be proven beyond question that on every important point Jesus’ conception of himself as Messiah differed radically from the conceptions held by all parties among the Jews.” In short, “the people of that day wanted a kingly Messiah, not a suffering Servant; they wanted a human political deliverer, not a divine spiritual Savior.” (Pinnock)

For the original apostles themselves to have perpetrated the hoax and deified Jesus is likewise impossible. The transformation of a simple moralistic Jesus into a divine Christ is a task of which they were psychologically, morally, and religiously incapable. Each of them had been schooled in centuries of Jewish monotheism and were very slow themselves to see and accept their Lord’s true significance. Besides, their standard of honesty stands second only to their Master’s in its integrity. And, in any case, “they would hardly have been prepared to die for something they themselves had cooked up most deceitfully!” (Pinnock)

With the starkness and bankruptcy of these “alternatives” in mind, let us turn again to the words of Pilate. “What then shall I do with Jesus?” This question is one of unfathomable importance; according to the Lord Jesus Christ, to answer it wrongly is to perish forever. “Unless you believe that I am He, you shall die in your sins.” (Jn 8:24) Moreover, no one can escape giving an answer of some sort to it. To make no decision for Jesus Christ, is to already decide against Him. To refuse to acknowledge the truth of His claims is to automatically heap upon Him the greatest of insults. A truce with Jesus is not possible.

Christians are often asked what it would take for them to give up their faith. We may well direct the question to you, our unbelieving friends. “What would it take for you to give up your unbelief?” In one sense, we do not seek to get you to believe in Christ, we only seek to get you to quit disbelieving!—to stop suppressing that which you know to be true and to turn from the dry and broken cistern of human autonomy to the fountain of living waters. “Let the one who is thirsty come.” (Jer 2:13; Rev 22:17)