

The Divinity of Christ



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by Peter Kreeft

The doctrine of Christ's divinity is the central Christian doctrine, for it is like a skeleton key that opens all the others. Christians have not independently reasoned out and tested each of the teachings of Christ received via Bible and Church, but believe them all on his authority. For if Christ is divine, He can be trusted to be infallible in everything He said, even hard things like exalting suffering and poverty, forbidding divorce, giving his Church the authority to teach and forgive sins in his name, warning about hell (very often and very seriously), instituting the scandalous sacrament of eating his flesh—we often forget how many "hard sayings" he taught!

When the first Christian apologists began to give a reason for the faith that was in them to unbelievers, this doctrine of Christ's divinity naturally came under attack, for it was almost as incredible to Gentiles as it was scandalous to Jews. That a man who was born out of a woman's womb and died on a cross, a man who got tired and hungry and angry and agitated and wept at his friend's tomb, that this man who got dirt under his fingernails should be God was, quite simply, the most astonishing, incredible, crazy-sounding idea that had ever entered the mind of man in all human history.

The argument the early apologists used to defend this apparently indefensible doctrine has become a classic one. C.S. Lewis used it often, e.g. in *Mere Christianity*, the book that convinced Chuck Colson (and thousands of others). I once spent half a book (*Between Heaven and Hell*) on this one argument alone. It is the most important argument in Christian apologetics, for once an unbeliever accepts the conclusion of this argument (that Christ is divine), everything else in the Faith follows, not only intellectually (Christ's teachings must all then be true) but also personally (if Christ is God, He is also your total Lord and Savior).

The argument, like all effective arguments, is extremely simple: Christ was either God or a bad man.

Unbelievers almost always say he was a good man, not a bad man; that he was a great moral teacher, a sage, a philosopher, a moralist, and a prophet, not a criminal, not a man who deserved to be crucified. But a good man is the one thing he could not possibly have been according to simple common sense and logic. For he claimed to be God. He said, "Before Abraham was, I Am", thus speaking the word no Jew dares to speak because it is God's own private name, spoken by God himself to Moses at the burning bush. Jesus wanted everyone to

believe that he was God. He wanted people to worship him. He claimed to forgive everyone's sins against everyone. (Who can do that but God, the One offended in every sin?)

Now what would we think of a person who went around making these claims today? Certainly not that he was a good man or a sage. There are only two possibilities: he either speaks the truth or not. If he speaks the truth, he is God and the case is closed. We must believe him and worship him. If he does not speak the truth, then he is not God but a mere man. But a mere man who wants you to worship him as God is not a good man. He is a very bad man indeed, either morally or intellectually. If he knows that he is not God, then he is morally bad, a liar trying deliberately to deceive you into blasphemy. If he does not know that he is not God, if he sincerely thinks he is God, then he is intellectually bad – in fact, insane.

A measure of your insanity is the size of the gap between what you think you are and what you really are. If I think I am the greatest philosopher in America, I am only an arrogant fool; if I think I am Napoleon, I am probably over the edge; if I think I am a butterfly, I am fully embarked from the sunny shores of sanity. But if I think I am God, I am even more insane because the gap between anything finite and the infinite God is even greater than the gap between any two finite things, even a man and a butterfly.

Josh McDowell summarized the argument simply and memorably in the trilemma "Lord, liar, or lunatic?" Those are the only options. Well, then, why not liar or lunatic? But almost no one who has read the Gospels can honestly and seriously consider that option. The savviness, the canniness, the human wisdom, the attractiveness of Jesus emerge from the Gospels with unavoidable force to any but the most hardened and prejudiced reader. Compare Jesus with liars like the Reverend Sun Myung Moon or lunatics like the dying Nietzsche. Jesus has in abundance precisely those three qualities that liars and lunatics most conspicuously lack:

1. His practical wisdom, his ability to read human hearts, to understand people and the real, unspoken question behind their words, his ability to heal people's spirits as well as their bodies;
2. His deep and winning love, his passionate compassion, his ability to attract people and make them feel at home and forgiven, his authority, "not as the scribes"; and above all
3. His ability to astonish, his unpredictability, his creativity. Liars and lunatics are all so dull and predictable! No one who knows both the Gospels and human beings can seriously entertain the possibility that Jesus was a liar or a lunatic, a bad man.

No, the unbeliever almost always believes that Jesus was a good man, a prophet, a sage. Well then, if he was a sage, you can trust him and believe the essential things he says. And the essential thing he says is that he is the divine Savior of the world and that you must come to him for salvation. If he is a sage, you must accept his essential teaching as true. If his teaching is false, then he is not a sage.

The strength of this argument is that it is not merely a logical argument about concepts; it is about Jesus. It invites people to read the Gospels and get to know this man. The premise of the argument is the character of Jesus, the human nature of Jesus. The argument has its feet on the earth. But it takes you to heaven, like Jacob's ladder (which Jesus said meant him: Gen 28:12; Jn 1:51). Each rung follows and holds together. The argument is logically airtight; there is simply no way out.

What, then, do people say when confronted with this argument? Often, they simply confess their prejudices: "Oh, I just can't believe that!" (But if it has been proved to be true, you must believe it if you really seek the truth!)

Sometimes, they go away, like many of Jesus' contemporaries, wondering and shaking their heads and thinking. That is perhaps the very best result you can hope for. The ground has been softened up and plowed. The seed has been sown. God will give the increase.

But if they know some modern theology, they have one of two escapes. Theology has an escape; common sense does not. Common sense is easily convertible. It is the theologians, now as then, who are the hardest to convert.

The **first** escape is the attack of the Scripture "scholars" on the historical reliability of the Gospels. Perhaps Jesus never claimed to be divine. Perhaps all the embarrassing passages were inventions of the early Church (say "Christian community" – it sounds nicer).

In that case, who invented traditional Christianity if not Christ? A lie, like a truth, must originate somewhere. Peter? The twelve? The next generation? What was the motive of whoever first invented the myth (euphemism for lie)? What did they get out of this elaborate, blasphemous hoax? For it must have been a deliberate lie, not a sincere confusion. No Jew confuses Creator with creature, God with man. And no man confuses a dead body with a resurrected, living one.

Here is what they got out of their hoax. Their friends and families scorned them. Their social standing, possessions, and political privileges were stolen from

them by both Jews and Romans. They were persecuted, imprisoned, whipped, tortured, exiled, crucified, eaten by lions, and cut to pieces by gladiators. So some silly Jews invented the whole elaborate, incredible lie of Christianity for absolutely no reason, and millions of Gentiles believed it, devoted their lives to it, and died for it—for no reason. It was only a fantastic practical joke, a hoax. Yes, there is a hoax indeed, but the perpetrators of it are the twentieth-century theologians, not the Gospel writers.

The **second** escape (notice how eager we are to squirm out of the arms of God like a greased pig) is to Orientalize Jesus, to interpret him not as the unique God-man but as one of many mystics or "adepts" who realized his own inner divinity just as a typical Hindu mystic does. This theory takes the teeth out of his claim to divinity, for he only realized that everyone is divine. The problem with that theory is simply that Jesus was not a Hindu but a Jew! When he said "God", neither he nor his hearers meant Brahman, the impersonal, pantheistic, immanent all; he meant Yahweh, the personal, theistic, transcendent Creator. It is utterly unhistorical to see Jesus as a mystic, a Jewish guru. He taught prayer, not meditation. His God is a person, not a pudding. He said he was God but not that everyone was. He taught sin and forgiveness, as no guru does. He said nothing about the "illusion" of individuality, as the mystics do.

Attack each of these evasions—Jesus as the good man. Jesus as the lunatic, Jesus as the liar, Jesus as the man who never claimed divinity, Jesus as the mystic—take away these flight squares, and there is only one square left for the unbeliever's king to move to. And on that square waits checkmate. And a joyous mating it is. The whole argument is really a wedding invitation.



'The Divinity of Christ'

from 'Fundamentals of Catholic Faith' by Peter Kreeft¹

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Recommended Readings and Resources

Recommended Links

The Catholic Faith

www.thecatholicfaith.info

The home of The Catholic Faith booklets.

Biblia Clerus

www.clerus.org/bibliaclerus/index_eng.html

The Holy See offers Sacred Scripture in the light of Sacred Tradition and Magisterial teachings, cross-referenced to commentaries, catechisms, councilor pronouncements, etc. Available for online use and as a downloadable program.

Catechism of the Catholic Church; Compendium of the Catechism

www.scborromeo.org/ccc.htm and;

www.vatican.va/archive

The Catechism is *the* reference text for authentic Catholic teachings.

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One of the most comprehensive and indispensable websites for Catholic apologetics (defence of Catholic doctrines). Have a browse, and try the "Quick Search" box on the top left of the page to look up any topic.

Peter Kreeft

www.peterkreeft.com

Articles and MP3 lectures by the renowned Catholic author and philosopher.

Radio Replies

www.icatholicism.net/apologetics/radio-replies.html

The famed anthology of Q&A's about virtually any topic on the faith.

Catholic Culture Site Reviews

www.catholicculture.org/reviews

Find links and check Catholic any websites on fidelity, resources and useability.

Recommended Books²

Handbook of Christian Apologetics by Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli

An exceptional Christian apologetics resource on topics such as faith and reason, the existence of God, the divinity of Christ, and objective truth.

Mere Christianity by C. S. Lewis

One of the most famous works of Christian apologetics that is also easy to read. Written by the Anglican author of the *Chronicles of Narnia*.

Between Heaven and Hell by Peter Kreeft

A fictional afterlife dialogue between C. S. Lewis, John F. Kennedy and Aldous Huxley which examines the claims of Christ.

Good News about Sex and Marriage by Christopher West

An expounder on the 'theology of the Body' by Pope John Paul II reveals the authentic meaning of human sexuality.

Early Christian Writings translated by Maxwell Staniforth

Writings of the Fathers known to the Apostles, including Clement, Ignatius and Polycarp.

How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization by Thomas E. Woods

An eye-opening book outlining how the Church had an indispensable role in every facet of Western civilization, including science, economics, morality, law, and fine arts.

Introduction to the Devout Life by St Francis de Sales

A guide to devout life while in the world. Written by the Saint at a dangerous time & place, where saying Mass was punishable by death, it has never gone out of print in 400 years.³

The Imitation of Christ by Thomas á Kempis

One of the greatest Catholic spiritual works, it has been cherished by all Christians. It is said to be second only to the bible in publication.³

True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin by St Louis Marie de Montfort

Praised by popes, theologians and mystics, this is perhaps the most celebrated book ever written about devotion to Mary.³

² Some of these are available for preview at books.google.com. For purchases, see amazon.com and, in New Zealand, thenile.co.nz, and jeromes.co.nz. See also your local library catalogue, which can be found from nzlibraries.com.

³ Also available to read online at www.catholictreasury.info