

The Big, Big Question

“The most pressing question on the problem of faith is whether a man as a civilized being can believe in the divinity of the Son of God, Jesus Christ.”

-Fyodor Dostoevski

Imagine yourself in attendance at the 1st Church of the Holy Brethren. It is the first time you have been here.

The service has been going along quite nicely. The music is good, the people seem nice, and the message has been absolutely excellent. The minister, Pastor A.J. Wilson*, has been sharing about the need for service, the excellence of showing love, the importance of showing forgiveness, and the fact that God is personally interested in the lives of people. You are feeling particularly challenged to go out and make a difference in the world. Then, suddenly, the pastor says something that just doesn't quite sit right with you.

*No relation to any real person.

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He says, *“Listen carefully, folks. One of these days, this church is going to burn up in flames. In fact, the whole earth – no, the whole universe is going to melt away. But my words, the words of Reverend A.J. Wilson, are going to live on forever. So make sure you are listening.”*

A short time later he makes another, even more outrageous claim.

You look at the person to your left to see if that struck her as odd, but she is intently focused on the message and doesn't seem to notice. You turn to the right and see the same lack of a reaction.

It gets worse. A short time later he makes another, even more outrageous claim.

He says, *“I am the road to salvation. Forget everything that you have ever heard because without the effect of A.J. Wilson in your life you are condemned to wander around aimlessly. I am your light. Follow me.”*

Whoa! Now that is just a bit too much. You begin looking around the room. You see a couple of raised eyebrows and weird looks that indicate that others, too, are shocked. Many, however, are smiling. One person even begins to applaud.

He continues. *“If you want to know God, there is only one way: Me! I am the only way you can get to Him. If you don't follow me, you can forget this whole God thing*

altogether. In fact, God and me, we are the same. He's me and I'm Him. Can you receive that?"

Many at this point stand to their feet cheering and applauding. A few begin running down the aisles and throwing themselves prostrate in front of the platform. Others, however, begin yelling at him and shaking their fists. A few throw their hymnals and cry out in anger.

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You make your way to the aisle and walk toward the back door, amazed at what you have seen and heard. Then, as you are leaving, the preacher is really flipping out. He is saying something about the need to eat his flesh and drink his blood to obtain salvation. It is way too much for you. You're out of there – you and many others who leave with you.

I think you probably know where I am heading with this. The example above isn't entirely accurate because Jesus' message was spread out over a three-year period. He didn't teach everything to people at the same time, but the point remains the same. Jesus made some pretty outrageous, even shocking claims. The ideas that A.J. Wilson was preaching are paraphrases of the exact teachings of our Lord Jesus. At that time, they were just as revolutionary and weird as we would consider them now if a person taught them today. Perhaps even more so. Consider the following passages. It may help to think of how you might respond to a person today who claimed such things.

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Matthew 9:6 - *“The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.”*

Matthew 11:29 - *“Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”*

Mark 8:38 - *“If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.”*

Luke 22:29 - *“I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me.”*

John 6:35 - *“I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.”*

John 14:6 - *“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”*

He claimed to be the ultimate judge of all mankind.

It would be easy to fill page after page with the radical claims of Jesus. He claimed that all things had been given to Him by God (Matthew 11:27). He claimed to be the One who sends prophets into the land (Matthew 23:34). He claimed that children should believe in Him as an object of religious worship (Mark 9:42). He claimed to be the ultimate judge of all mankind

(Matthew 25:17-46). He claimed that He would speak from Heaven and give people wisdom and words to say in times of trial (Luke 21:14-15). He even claimed the ability to forgive sins (Mark 2:5, Luke 5:20 and 7:48). And, perhaps most importantly, He received worship from other people, despite the fact that He also taught that God is One and that only God is to be worshipped (Matthew 4:10 and 28:9, John 20:28).

So, the big, big question is this: *Who was Jesus?*

It is the most important question a person can ever answer, and it should be a question that we commonly use to challenge people in their spiritual walks. Anytime you encounter a non-Christian, whether an atheist, agnostic, Hindu, or Buddhist, this is a good question to ask.

A few years ago, I was on a short-term missions trip to Brussels, Belgium, and during that trip, while doing surveys in La Grand Place de Bruxelles, I met an atheist gentleman from Norway. It only took a few questions from the survey before he wanted to make it very clear where he stood. He said, *“I’ll be honest with you. I think Christians are idiots.”* He continued to say, *“Christianity is just a religion that weak people use as a crutch for something to lean on. It is a fairy tale.”* He went on to elaborate on his opinion of Christianity and Christians in general, but the gist of it was that he had an intense dislike for everything Christian. As far as his treatment of me was concerned, he was actually quite nice, or at least as nice as a person can be when he calls you an idiot, but he most definitely was not

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an advocate of my faith. He was clearly intelligent, however, and I enjoyed talking with him.

At the end of the survey, after he answered all of the questions, I said to him, *“So, I know what you think of Christianity at this point. What do you think about Jesus? What is your take on Him?”* He explained to me what he thought, and I responded with something like, *“The reason I ask is that, even though I grew up in church, I didn't want to believe the whole thing just because my mom and dad said I should or the preacher said I should. But I also figured if there was even the possibility, even the remotest possibility, that there might be a Heaven and a Hell, I'd better figure this whole thing out. Make sense?”* He indicated he understood my view, and I continued. *“So, for about the last thirteen years, I have dedicated myself to studying this stuff, and I found out some pretty amazing things about Jesus, the Bible, and Christianity. Can I share with you a few things that I discovered? It will only take a few minutes.”* He said that it would be fine, so I began to talk with him about a few of the things that we are going to discuss in the next two chapters – ideas concerning the identity of Jesus.

“I guess I am going to have to go home and rethink my position.”

After just a few minutes of sharing with him, I asked him what he thought, and I loved his response. He said, *“Hmmm. Well, I had never heard any of that before. I guess I am going to have to go home and rethink my position.”*

I concluded by asking him if he would consider reading the Bible, and he said he might consider that. At that point, we shook hands and parted

ways. I have had many such conversations over the years. The arguments that will be presented in the next couple of chapters are strong. In my opinion, they are overwhelmingly conclusive. In 1 Peter 3:15, Christians are instructed, “*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.*” The reason for our hope is Jesus. As Christians, then, we need to become skilled at sharing with others why we follow Jesus – what it is that sets Him apart from every other person, philosophy, and religion.

I am convinced that the reason more people don't actively share their faith with others is that they are afraid of running into someone like this Norwegian atheist. They are afraid they will encounter someone who makes comments or asks questions that they don't know how to answer. And, even though the average person isn't nearly that skeptical, because there are people like that out there, many Christians don't talk to anyone. Even though a person like the skeptic above might be one in a hundred, Christians don't share with the other ninety-nine for fear of an encounter with the one. For that reason, learning some of the evidence behind the Christian faith is absolutely essential for us to reach our potential in God's Kingdom. Of course, beyond that, when we know the evidence ourselves, it encourages us, builds us up, and strengthens our own beliefs.

Because there are people like that out there, many Christians don't talk to anyone.

C.S. Lewis is often quoted as saying, “*My heart cannot rejoice in what my mind accepts as false.*” The sad truth is, many Christians walk around with

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nagging doubts in the back of their heads because of their own personal concerns pertaining to the veracity of the Bible, the historicity of Jesus, and so on. Often, these nagging doubts are catered to rather than the truths that we embrace. Because of this, many Christians are rendered completely impotent when it comes to their witness. How can a Christian stir deep-seeded passion in the life of another when in reality the Christian himself is somewhat passionless? Studying the evidence behind Christianity can help us dispel some of those doubts, which in turn can open doors for God to increase our faith as we continue in obedience to Him. Of course, knowledge of the truth and actual faith are two completely different things.

I have heard stories centered on Niagara Falls that will help illustrate this point.

On June 30, 1859, tightrope walker Jean Francois Gravelet, the great Blondin, was the first man ever to cross Niagara Falls on a tightrope, and the crowd loved it. He was amazing. On some trips he would turn backward somersaults to excite the crowd. At other times he would lower a rope to a boat below, pull up a bottle, and sit down for a refreshment. On still other occasions he would walk blindfolded, ride a bike, push a wheelbarrow, make an omelet, and make the trips with his hands and feet manacled. His greatest stunt, however, was that of carrying his manager, Harry Colcord, on his back.

I want you to imagine what could have happened next.

What if, as the crowd was still cheering, excited about what they had seen him do, the Great Blondin had raised his hands to hush them. After a few moments, the crowd had become silent and the Great Blondin addressed them.

“I know what you have seen today has been amazing, but I have saved my best trick for last. Today, you will be a witness to history as I not only carry my manager back across the falls on my back but I also put another person in a wheelbarrow and push him in front of me!”

At this announcement the crowd would go wild, cheering, screaming, and whistling. Some would be yelling, *“You can do it, Blondin!”* Others would scream, *“You’ve got this! Piece of cake.”* The crowd might continue to cheer for a couple of minutes as Jean Francois readied himself on the platform with his wheelbarrow and his manager.

Then, as the crowd continued to yell, cheer, and push him on, he would turn to the crowd, raise his hands in the air and yell, *“Who is going to be my volunteer?”* And then . . .

Silence.

Nothing.

Not a sound.

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Somewhere in the background a baby might begin to cry, a young man would clear his throat, and a few people would shift from one leg to another as they stared at the ground, avoiding eye contact. A few proud souls might manage to smile politely, but not one of the thousands of people gathered would step forward.

This crowd would have seen the evidence. They would know, almost without the slightest doubt, that this daredevil could do what he said he could do. They would have seen with their own eyes that he was reliable and trustworthy. There will always be a difference, however, between knowing someone is trustworthy and placing your trust in that person. It would be one thing to acknowledge the safety of the wheelbarrow. It would be another thing entirely to climb aboard.

When it comes to Jesus, the evidence is available. I believe it is overwhelmingly conclusive and convincing. But not all will choose to respond to it. I can hear what it would have been like for some as they left Niagara Falls that day. Grown men would have remarked casually to their families, *“The wind seemed to be picking up a bit, don't you think? Seemed a little more risky to me than before.”* Others would say, *“He looked a little wobbly to me on the last trip. Did he look wobbly to you?”*

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All the evidence in the world will not convince some people of the truth of Jesus Christ – not because the evidence isn't good, but because acknowledging the evidence demands something from them that they are

not willing to give. It demands their life. For many, the battle for faith is not a battle of the mind, it is a battle of the will.

So, who is Jesus?

The bottom line is this: About 2000 years ago, a radical new religion sprang up centered on the life and teachings of a man called Jesus. Many people came to worship Him as God. Today, it is the largest religion on the planet with more than two billion people who call themselves Christian. There are only a few possibilities:

He was a legend or myth: He may or may not have been a real historical figure, but through word-of-mouth testimony (or deliberate lies) His story became blown way out of proportion. He never intended to be worshiped as God.

He was a liar: He knew He wasn't God, but He convinced others that He was. This would make Him a vicious liar.

He was a lunatic: He thought He was God, but He wasn't. He was insane.

He was the Lord God: He was who His followers claimed He was – the Son of God, sent to Earth to redeem man from his sins; God in the flesh.

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There are a very few other possibilities that exist in the world, specifically when talking with Muslims (Jesus was a prophet of God) or Mormons (Jesus was one god in a series of many gods, and we can become like Him.) For the purposes of our discussion here, however, we will restrict ourselves to the four possibilities listed above. In the vast majority of situations Christians are likely to encounter while sharing their faith, these arguments should prove sufficient. Typically, if you ask a group of average non-Christians on the street who they think Jesus was, about 7 to 9 out of 10 are going to say something along the lines of this: He was a great teacher, a good person, or a great moral reformer. A very small portion are going to say He was a myth and that He may or may not have been a real historical entity, but they will say that, either way, His story was blown up beyond reality. Still another small percentage will say that they aren't sure, they don't really care, or they never really think about it. We will address these issues in the next two chapters. Hopefully, the next time you encounter a person who doesn't believe Jesus is the Son of God, you will be equipped to rationally and intelligently give reasons for why you believe what you believe. But remember, getting there begins by asking them the big, big question: *"Who was Jesus?"*

The next time you encounter someone who doesn't believe Jesus is the Son of God, you will be equipped.

So, the next time you encounter a person and are not sure what to say, make sure to ask the big, big question. It has amazing potential to change people's lives forever.

Discussion Questions:

- What are some things that Jesus said that would be considered very outrageous if you heard them today?
- Why is the identity of Jesus important?
- What is the difference between recognizing something as trustworthy and placing your trust in that something?
- What are some common answers when people are addressed with the question “Who was (is) Jesus?”
- Who is Jesus to you?