

Good Friday

Liar, Lunatic, or Lord?

Selected Texts

Rev. Freddy Fritz

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Liar, Lunatic, or Lord?

Introduction

In 1977 Josh McDowell wrote a book titled, *More Than a Carpenter*. He released a revised edition, with collaboration from his son, Sean, in 2009.¹ We are giving this book to first-time visitors this Easter Sunday. I would like to reflect on another one of the chapters of this book tonight.

No other human figure has been as dominant as Jesus Christ of Nazareth. The world-renowned historian Jaroslav Pelikan makes this clear:

Regardless of what anyone may personally think or believe about him, Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in the history of the Western culture for almost twenty centuries. If it were possible, with some sort of super magnet, to pull up out of that history every scrap of metal bearing at least a trace of his name, how much would be left? It is from his birth that most of the human race dates its calendars, it is by his name that millions curse, and in his name that millions pray (Pelikan, JTC, 1).²

Many people have a high regard for Jesus. They assert that he was a great man, a great moral teacher, a great example, or a great martyr. But what did Jesus think about himself?

Jesus believed that it was critically important what others thought about him. C. S. Lewis captured this truth in his book, *Mere Christianity*. After surveying the evidence regarding

¹ Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell, *More Than a Carpenter* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2009).

² Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict: Life-Changing Truth for a Skeptical World* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2017), n.p.

Jesus' identity, Lewis writes:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God." That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to (Lewis, MC, 55–56).³

Jesus regarded himself as God in human form. Jesus' claim must be either true or false. If Jesus' claim to be God is true, then we must respond appropriately. But, if Jesus' claim to be God is false, then either he knew that his claim was false (thus making him a liar), or he did not know that his claim was false (thus making him a lunatic).

Lesson

Tonight, I would like to examine three options regarding Jesus' claim to be God.

Let's use the following outline:

1. Is Jesus a Liar?
2. Is Jesus a Lunatic?

³ Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, n.p.

3. Is Jesus Lord?

I. Is Jesus a Liar?

First, is Jesus a liar?

If Jesus knew that he was not God, then he was making a deliberate misrepresentation, and he was a liar. But, he was more than a liar. He would also be a hypocrite. And, worse, he was also a fool, because he eventually died for the lie that he was promoting.

But, how could Jesus—a liar, a hypocrite, and a fool—leave us with the most profound and powerful teaching in history? How could a liar teach life-changing truths and live such an exemplary moral life? The notion stretches credulity.

However, most open-minded people, even those opposed to Christianity, admit that Jesus was an amazing teacher and not a liar. In his work, *The Person of Christ*, historian Philip Schaff addresses the question that Jesus was a liar, and writes, “The hypothesis of imposture is so revolting to moral as well as common sense, that its mere statement is its condemnation.... [N]o scholar of any decency and self-respect would now dare to profess it openly” (Schaff, PC, 103).⁴

In his book, *Cold-Case Christianity*, J. Warner Wallace, a cold-case homicide detective, lists the three types of motives that lie at the heart of any misbehavior: (1) financial greed, (2) sexual or relational desire, and (3) pursuit of power (Wallace, CCC, 240).⁵ Did Jesus perhaps lie about his identity because of one of these three motives?

Was Jesus motivated by financial greed? Jesus taught his disci-

⁴ Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, n.p.

⁵ Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, n.p.

ples to give their possessions to the needy, not to store up treasures in this life, but to store up treasures in heaven (Luke 12:32-34). Jesus never profited from his preaching and healing. Moreover, Jesus' only possession at the end of his life was his robe. No, he was not motivated by financial greed.

Was Jesus motivated by sexual or relational desire? Jesus had exemplary relationships with all people, including the many women who followed him (Luke 8:2-3). There is simply no evidence that he was motivated by sexual or relational desire.

Or was Jesus motivated by the pursuit of power? Jesus' ministry model was that of servanthood. He taught that the greatest is the one who serves (Luke 22:24-27). Commentator Joel Green explains the significance of Jesus' teachings on this matter, “He does not deny, then, that some will lead, and so on; after all, he has been portrayed within the Lukan narrative as lord and king. He insists, rather, that his status as lord and king, as greatest, is expressed in the shape of his service, which is so integral to his character that it will determine the manner of his comportment with the faithful even in the eschaton (12:35–38). So also must it be the defining quality of the apostles—who, then, are to turn from their obsession with their own status to a comparable attentiveness to the needs of others” (Green, GL, 769).⁶

So, it is clear that Jesus did not lie about his identity.

II. Is Jesus a Lunatic?

Second, is Jesus a lunatic?

Perhaps Jesus was simply mistaken about his identity. He may have thought that he was God, but he was not. After

⁶ Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, n.p.

Good Friday

all, one can be sincere and sincerely wrong at the same time.

Jesus lived in a fiercely monotheistic culture. So, to tell others that their eternal destiny depended on believing in him would not have been at all well received.

Christian philosopher Peter Kreeft presents this option and then shows why we must reject it:

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.

Well, then, why not [view Jesus as a] 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.... 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...; (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 (Kreeft, FF, 60–61).⁷

⁷ Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, n.p.

III. Is Jesus Lord?

Or third, is Jesus Lord?

If Jesus is not a liar or a lunatic, then he must be Lord. When people were trying to figure out Jesus' identity, Jesus asked his disciples, "**But who do you say that I am?**" **Simon Peter replied,** "**You are the Christ, the Son of the living God**" (Matthew 16:15–16). And after his resurrection, when doubting Thomas saw the resurrected Jesus, he said, "**My Lord and my God!**" (John 20:28).

Many have set to disprove that Jesus is God in human form. But, after an honest study of the question, they have come to see that Jesus' claim to be God is in fact true. Last night's message examined and affirmed Jesus' claims to deity.

Conclusion

So, what is your response to Jesus' identity?

Jesus is either a liar, a lunatic, or the Lord. You must make a choice. The Apostle John wrote in John 20:30–31, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

The evidence is clear that Jesus is Lord. However, some people reject the evidence because of the moral implication involved. They are unwilling to change their lives. But, that will lead to a most tragic end. Jesus eventually died on the cross to save sinners such as ourselves. Believe that Jesus is God and the savior of sinners, repent of your sin, and live! Amen.

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*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

Answers for Life!

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org

Web site: www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org