

Consider Jesus

Investigating the Man at the Center
of the Christian Faith



A **Next Steps** Resource of Mercy Hill Church

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of the Christian Faith

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Much of the content of this booklet has been adapted from a sermon delivered by Nick Weber at Mercy Hill Church entitled "But Who Do You Say that I Am?" If you prefer listening to reading, you can find this sermon online at mercyhillchurch.org.

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.

Matthew 16:13-17

Contents

A Church for the Skeptical	7
But Who Do You Say That I Am?.....	7
Your Five Options.....	8
Option #1: Legend	8
Option #2: Luminary.....	18
Option #3: Liar	21
Option #4: Lunatic	23
Option #5: Lord.....	25
Want More?.....	26
Need Help?	26
What's Next?	27

A Church for the Skeptical

At Mercy Hill, we want to be a church open to those seeking, inquiring, and even skeptical of the Christian faith. We don't look down on your questions. We invite them. We want to be a safe place for you to discuss them. We've all probably asked them at one point ourselves. We may even be asking them right now!

Whatever the case, we have full confidence that God can handle any doubts we may bring. Contrary to popular thought, Christianity is not a mere "blind leap of faith." It accords with reason (Acts 17:2; 18:19; 19:9; cf. Rom. 1:18-32). And we think it is the Christian explanation above all that makes the most sense of the world around us and our experience within it. Perhaps you'll come to conclude the same . . . but we'll see!

But Who Do You Say That I Am?

The whole complex of the Christian faith rises or falls with the person and work of Jesus. If he is not who he said he is, if he has not done what the Scriptures say he did, then it all comes crumbling down and we Christians are most to be pitied (1 Cor. 15:19). Therefore, the place to begin one's investigation into Christianity is with an investigation into the person and work of Jesus (the *Christ*) himself.

In Matthew 16:13-17, it is this very issue that Jesus presses on his disciples. After hearing who the crowds are saying that he is, he turns in on them and asks: "But who do *you* say that I am?" (v. 15).¹ It is an arresting question. It is a question on which everything turns. Indeed, there is no more important question in all the universe that a human being could endeavor to answer.

And it is a question that each one of us must answer for ourselves.

¹ Any emphasis in Scripture citations has been added by the author.

We at Mercy Hill have put our chips in with Peter on this. Jesus is not merely an admirable man nor a powerful prophet. He is “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (v. 16). He is the Lord of all and Savior of the world. But why do we believe this? Can such claims stand up to scrutiny and skepticism? I suppose we should find out!



Hit pause for a moment before you go any further. Read Matthew 16:13-17 in full. If you were among the disciples here and Jesus were to press the matter on you personally, what would your answer be? Who do you say that he is? Why? What factors have caused you to conclude this? Have you always felt this way about him or have things changed and developed over the years? Would you say that you are open to further development or is your mind pretty much made up? What do you hope to gain from this small study?

Your Five Options

To help you along in answering this question (“But who do you say that I am?”) for yourself, let me hold out for you what I consider to be your five basic options. Indeed, if I were to ask anyone who they say Jesus is, most assuredly their answer would fall into one of these five in one way or another. Let us take them, therefore, one by one and see which of them, in fact, seems most reasonable at the end.

Option #1: Legend

The first option we come to is this idea that Jesus was in some way a legend. What is meant by this is that either: (1) *he didn’t exist at all*; or (2) if he did exist, the historical Jesus has been so embellished through the years by his followers—with myth and superstition and the like—that

he's now essentially buried somewhere underneath it all. You may be able to find something of him under all of that, but you have to peel back an awful lot of husks to get at the small kernel of truth deep within. Let's look at these two variations in turn.

Variation #1: He Never Existed

On the first idea—really the most extreme of our options—it should be said that virtually no respectable scholar goes so far as to say Jesus didn't exist at all. As biblical scholar F.F. Bruce notes:

Some writers may toy with the fancy of a 'Christ-myth,' but they do not do so on the ground of historical evidence. The historicity of Christ is as axiomatic for an unbiased historian as the historicity of Julius Caesar. It is not historians who propagate the 'Christ-myth' theories.²

In other words: if you're an honest historian you simply can't deny that Jesus existed. There's just too much evidence to support it.

For example: interestingly, quite a few extrabiblical, even non-Christian, sources reference Jesus—his life, death, and arguably even his purported resurrection—many of these coming out of the first and second centuries AD. Here we think of men like the Roman historians Tacitus (c. 56-120 AD) and Suetonius (c. 69-150 AD), or a Roman governor in Asia Minor referred to as Pliny the Younger (c. 61-112 AD), or the prominent Jewish historian Josephus (c. 37-100 AD). None of these men had anything to gain in validating the historicity of Jesus. And that makes their testimony all the more credible.

That's why the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, in their article on Jesus, referring to these sorts of things, concludes:

These independent accounts prove that in ancient times even the opponents of Christianity never doubted the historicity of Jesus, which was disputed for the first time and on inadequate grounds by

² F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 123.

several authors at the end of the 18th, during the 19th, and at the beginning of the 20th centuries.³

In other words: this whole notion that Jesus didn't exist at all is a relatively modern phenomenon.

Jesus of Nazareth, whatever else he was, certainly existed. He has simply exerted too much influence on the history of the world to be a complete and total fabrication.

Variation #2: He Is Buried Under Embellishment

But we're not done dismissing this legend bit quite yet are we? Often what we encounter from others in this regard is that somewhat less severe idea that the Jesus of history is simply quite different from the Jesus who came to be so embellished in the Bible. The narrative we're often told on this point is that the early communities passed stories down about Jesus by way of oral tradition and, in one way or another, over time, they exaggerated things—things about his supernatural power, about his claims of deity, about his fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, and certainly about his resurrection from the dead. They exaggerated in this way perhaps because they were attempting some sort of a political power grab or maybe because they just simply missed him—and, in their sorrow, they either thought they saw him as resurrected and alive or at least began telling stories as if he were because there was something strangely cathartic about the idea for them. But, whatever the case, when these stories finally got put into writing, one thing is sure: they no longer accurately described the Jesus of history.

But let me now at least outline for you three (of many) reasons why this simply cannot be.

³ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed. (New York, NY: University Press, 1974), 145, quoted in Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), 135.

REASON #1: FUNDAMENTAL IMPROBABILITIES

The idea that somehow Jesus was imagined into this divine being, embellished by his followers until, as generations passed, people actually started to believe it is, in reality, highly improbable. And I'll tell you why.

Jesus was Jewish. His disciples, at least at the beginning when all this was getting starting, were Jewish. And the Jews, we must remember, were rigorously *monotheistic*—more so than any other people in history. By this, of course, we mean that they had it drilled into them from day one that there is only one true God and there can be no other.

Do you remember the very first commandment God gives them at Sinai? “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have *no other gods* before me” (Exod. 20:2-3). And, additionally, you might recall, every morning and evening the faithful Jew would recite what's known as the Shema, taken from Deuteronomy 6, that begins in verse 4 like this: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is *one*.”

We could imagine, perhaps, the Romans dreaming up one of their men to be a god. They essentially did just this with their various emperors. But, for the Jews, the idea was detestable. Why do you think that, for the early Christians, it was their fellow Jews who were their fiercest opponents, with so many trying to put them to death on account of this apparent blasphemy?! So it is unthinkable that these Jewish disciples would suddenly start calling a man God unless, in fact, he really proved himself to be so.

Beyond all of this, we must also remember that Jesus was not the sort of Messiah these Jews were expecting. They thought he would come and *conquer*—not come and be *crucified*. That's just not the kind of Christ they anticipated, nor is it the one whom they even wanted, at least not at first. Jesus is throughout the Gospels having to push back on their false notions.⁴ Peter at one point even rebukes him for this idea of the cross (Matt. 16:22).

⁴ Which is why, by the way, Jesus immediately follows up Peter's confession of him as “the Christ” (Matt. 16:16) by disclosing the fact that he, as the Christ, must die: “From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (v. 21). He is pushing back here on their mistaken sense that he has come

All of this to say: these early followers of Jesus were not in any way predisposed to the ideas of Jesus we now have today. In fact, for a number of reasons, they would seem to be the least likely to ever consider them.

How or why they would ever embellish this crucified peasant from Nazareth to be their Christ—their Lord and their God (cf. John 20:28)—is beyond an answer . . . unless, of course, it's just the way things really went!

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REASON #2: EARLY COMPOSITION

In addition to these things, the simple fact is that the New Testament Gospels and letters arise far too early—far too close to the events they are trying to embellish—to pull this sort of thing off. They are not written hundreds of years later, but within the lifetime of eyewitnesses.

While the four Gospels were written at the very most forty to sixty years after Jesus' death,⁵ the earliest accounts of his crucifixion and

to overthrow Rome. He's not come to face down such earthly enemies, but rather those ancient and far more elemental enemies: namely, Satan, sin, and death. But, nevertheless, for the Jews at this time, and for many still today, a crucified Christ was a contradiction in terms! It would take a lot for them to accept it, and it certainly would not be the sort of thing they would ever think, nor want, to make up.

⁵ Even Bart Ehrman, the prominent scholar well-known for his skepticism of Christianity, dates Mark to 65-70 AD, Matthew and Luke to 80-85 AD, and John to 95 AD. We're talking, then, about all of this being recorded within a few decades of the events themselves and certainly within the lifetime of countless eyewitnesses who could easily

resurrection actually aren't found in the Gospels but in the letters of Paul—some of which were written just fifteen or so years after the death of Jesus.

Consider 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 for example:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

I want you to observe a couple of things here. First, in this earliest of documents referencing the death and resurrection of Jesus, Paul draws on a creedal tradition that clearly was delivered to him yet still at an even earlier date: "For I delivered to you as of first importance *what I also received . . .*" (v. 3). This isn't something Paul was trying to invent. This is something Paul had already been told by those who had come before even him, and he was simply here writing it down. This means, in no uncertain terms, that the claim concerning Jesus' death and resurrection could not have been some later embellishment. It was there from the very beginning.

But, secondly, notice the way Paul grounds all of this in eyewitness testimony. Such a thing is outrageously gutsy if he knows that Jesus' resurrection is a sham. He is invoking hundreds of eyewitnesses to it, which he emphasizes: "most of whom are still alive" (v. 6). Why does he make note of this? Well, because this is how history worked in the ancient world. They didn't have video cameras or voice recorders or whatever else we use to establish historical fact today. They had eyewitness testimony. That's it. So Paul here is inviting any reader of this public letter to go and test his claims. Do you understand that? If you want to put an end to this nonsense all you have to do is head into Jerusalem,

contradict any false content or claim. (Peter J. Williams, *Can We Trust the Gospels?* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018], 48.)

interview a few of the witnesses mentioned here, and, if they all deny it or their testimonies contradict, you could kill this Christianity thing before it ever even gets out of the gate.

If you are trying to embellish history, if you are trying to massage the facts for your own ends, you've got to wait until all those who were actually there and can contradict you are dead. You don't invoke them and invite people to go talk to them . . . unless, of course, their testimony will actually confirm what you claim!

REASON #3: COUNTERPRODUCTIVE CONTENT

We must also realize that the New Testament documents themselves contain many things that would actually seem to work against their public promotion and acceptance. I'll give you just two examples here.

Example #1: The Foolishness of the Founders

First, there is much in the Gospel accounts that actually has the twelve disciples of Jesus looking like utter fools. These are the founders of Christianity, at least in a certain sense, and they appear, almost on every page, to be ridiculous and embarrassing.

Have you ever read the Gospels, I wonder? If you have I'm sure you know quite well what I'm referring to. There are numerous places along the way where the reader simply finds himself going palm to face. How could these guys be so blind?! How could they be so arrogant?! How could they be so (frankly) dumb?!

- So we read of Jesus setting his face "to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51) where, as he just told his disciples, he must *die for his enemies* (vv. 22, 44). Yet in the very next verses these same disciples are shown asking him permission that they might call down fire on his enemies and destroy them (vv. 52-55). Somehow, though it's been spelled out so plainly for them, they've still missed the very heart of the gospel! Palm to face.
- Later, now in Jerusalem, Jesus is sitting with his disciples around the table of the Last Supper. And again he is telling them that he will soon die—his body will be broken and blood poured out—

for the forgiveness of sins and the initiation of a new covenant (Luke 22:14-23). And yet, once more, his disciples couldn't be further from the mark. For in the very next verse we read: "A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as *the greatest*" (v. 24). The greatest?! Are you serious?! Jesus is talking about laying his life down as a servant for all and they are arguing like a bunch of teenage boys about which one among them is better than the others?! Palm to face.

- Fast forward a few hours. Jesus has been betrayed and delivered into the hands of the Jewish leaders. Peter has followed from a distance and is outside in the courtyard. This is brave and courageous Peter, the "rock" (Matt. 16:18)—the man who will later be regarded by all as one of the most prominent figures in the early church community. And yet, as he's become somewhat infamous for now, when a little servant girl sees him there in the courtyard and recognizes him as one of Jesus' disciples, Peter outright denies it. And he does so three times in total—even invoking a curse upon himself, asking that he be struck dead were he not telling anything but the truth (Matt. 26:74). So let's get this straight. While Jesus, before the Jewish court, is willingly, lovingly preparing to take upon himself the curse from God due our own sin (cf. Gal. 3:13), Peter is spinelessly, selfishly, dishonestly invoking a curse upon himself in an effort to cut ties with his Master and save his own neck. The only reason Peter doesn't drop dead right then and there in that courtyard is because Jesus will soon drop dead in his place the next day at Calvary. And Peter has no clue! It's almost too much. Palm to face.
- But I'll give you one more instance still. Skip ahead a few days. Jesus has risen! Just as he said he would. The women were the first to come upon the empty tomb. And they run immediately back, in a rush of excitement, to tell the eleven apostles. But we're told that these men, these future pillars of the church, all but laughed in their faces: "[T]hese words seemed to them an *idle tale*, and they did not believe them" (Luke 24:11). Time and again Jesus had spoken of his resurrection with his disciples, using clear and unmistakable language. And yet here, when these

women announce that he has yet once more been true to his word, the disciples find them to be silly and out of touch. Again, palm to face.

So where exactly am I going with all of this?

Well, to cut straight to the point, let me ask you: *if you were the one writing the stories in these Gospels, if you had the chance to shape and massage them to suit your desires, if you were trying to win people's trust and perhaps even gain a little power over them, would you include these humiliating, even self-deprecating details? Would you present yourself in such a negative fashion?*

I think you know the answer. If you need any convincing, just look at the way you handle your social media accounts (if you have any). Isn't it true that we all post to Facebook or Instagram only those things that put us in the best of light? "Here's a pic of the delicious meal I cooked up from scratch." "Here's a shot of my wife and I out on a date—snuggled up close, radiant smiles." Etc. No one publicizes the nights they're at home eating ramen from a cup because it's the end of the month and they've run out of cash. No one posts about the latest tiff with their spouse that had them sleeping angry in separate rooms. We censor those things. We edit them out. We present the world with the best possible version of ourselves, and nothing more. Because we want them to like us, admire us, think much of us, follow us.

So, if this what we do, why in the world are these early disciples not doing the same thing? Why are they seemingly unconcerned with the fact that they come off looking like total fools in the very documents which they themselves are superintending?

I think, for one thing, we can conclude that they share such details because they must have really happened. No one would want to make this up about themselves. Our lies always move in the opposite direction.

But, beyond this, it seems clear that they are willing to share such embarrassing things about themselves because they know, in the end, it all serves to enhance, not their own glory, but Christ's. When transformation happens, when the early church takes off, when Peter is brave and bold, when the apostles die for the cause . . . we are not left admiring

these men. Oh no. We are left admiring Jesus—and wondering at his grace that can do so much with such weak and sinful people!⁶

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Example #2: The Witness of the Women

Let me quickly give you a second example of the sort of “counterproductive content” I’m referring to.

For this, consider the fact that all four of the Gospels identify women as the first witnesses of the resurrection (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:1; Luke 24:1; John 20:1). “What’s the big deal with that?” you ask. Well, the testimony of women in ancient times was almost entirely disregarded. Their testimonies were considered inadmissible in both Roman and Jewish courts. Of course, this offends our twenty-first century sensibilities, but the fact is that women were seen as unreliable in Jesus’ day.

⁶ Certainly, this argument still holds even if we are to think of the Gospel records as being embellished upon by later Christians trying to gain social prominence and things. If you had a chance to remove some of the embarrassing stories about the founders of your faith, wouldn’t you? This is your team. These are your guys. Who would want to be seen as following after a bunch of imbeciles? Not me. Not you.

But the later communities didn’t edit these things out. They didn’t have to make the founders look better than they were. Because it wasn’t about them. It was about Jesus—his grace, his love, his ability to take broken sinners and make from them something beautiful!

So the question we must face is this: if you are trying to promote your fabrication, your legend, your lie to both Jewish and Gentile people in the first century, why on earth do you make women the first witnesses to the resurrection? As Rebecca McLaughlin puts it: such a thing “would be like resting a vital legal claim today on the testimony of a few kids.”⁷ It certainly doesn’t give their cause any more credibility. In fact, it really could serve to undermine it. So why include that detail? Why not massage the facts a little bit?

Upon consideration, the only truly reasonable answer is that they wrote it this way because it actually happened this way. They were convinced that the truth would commend itself in the end. They didn’t have to add to it, subtract from it, or massage it. They could simply record it, trusting that their God, in due time, would indeed vindicate it!

* * *

Perhaps it would be wise to let C.S. Lewis (a brilliant man who taught at both Oxford and Cambridge) drive the final nail in the coffin of this first option. He writes, “As a literary historian, I am perfectly convinced that whatever else the Gospels are they are not legends. I have read a great deal of legend and I am quite clear that they are not the same sort of thing.”⁸

So if, after examining this evidence, we can safely conclude that Jesus is no mere legend, what other options remain open to us? Who or what else might we say that he is?

Option #2: Luminary

This second option, it seems to me, is where the great majority of people these days try to go. They can’t deny the historicity of the man, nor can they deny that there is much in his life and teaching to be admired, but seeing as they are unwilling to bend their knee to him as Lord, they try to get away with merely honoring him as a great luminary instead. He

⁷ Rebecca McLaughlin, *Confronting Christianity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 107.

⁸ C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 169.

is, perhaps, the highest example of humanity—he is a great teacher, a great rabbi, a great prophet . . . but he is nothing more.

This is why someone like Gandhi would say, "I could accept Jesus as a martyr, and embodiment of sacrifice, and a divine teacher. His death on the cross was a great example to the world, but that there was anything like a mysterious or miraculous virtue in it, my heart could not accept."⁹ In other words: Jesus is a good teacher, a good example, but that's as far as he's willing to go.

Messiah or Megalomaniac?

But, now, if we've sufficiently established that the Gospels are not legends but accurate accounts of Jesus' own life and teaching, then, as we read them, we quickly ascertain that he can in no way be a mere luminary, a good teacher of sorts. The option isn't left open to us. And this is precisely because of the grandiose nature of his own claims.

John Stott elucidates this wonderfully in his little book *Basic Christianity*:

The most striking feature of the teaching of Jesus is that he was constantly talking about himself.

. . . This self-centeredness of the teaching of Jesus immediately sets him apart from the other great religious teachers of the world. They were self-effacing. He was self-advancing. They pointed men away from themselves, saying, "That is the truth, so far as I perceive it; follow that." Jesus said, "I am the truth, follow me." The founder of none of the ethnic religions ever dared to say such a thing. The personal pronoun forces itself repeatedly on our attention as we read his words. For example:

"I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst."

"I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

⁹ Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, quoted in Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2009), 193.

"I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die."

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me."¹⁰

After going on like this for pages, Stott comes out and concludes:

We cannot any longer regard Jesus as simply a great teacher if he was completely mistaken in one of the chief subjects of his teaching—himself. There is a certain disturbing "megalomania" about Jesus which many scholars have recognized.¹¹

The Trilemma

All of this leads us now to what has become known as the trilemma, described most memorably for us by C.S. Lewis in his classic *Mere Christianity*:

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 patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.¹²

¹⁰ John Stott, *Basic Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 29-30.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹² C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 1980), 52.

So there you have it. If he's not a legend, and he cannot be a mere luminary, then he must either be a liar, a lunatic, or the Lord of all!

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 patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

Option #3: Liar

This option would say that all those claims he makes about himself are from malice—he simply deceived these people into believing he was something more, something he was not. But against this, we shall just put forward one quick argument . . .

The Quality of His Character

Even those who reject Jesus' claims cannot deny the absolute moral perfection he presents us with. Historian and skeptic William Lecky wrote of this in his *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne*:

[The character of Jesus] has been not only the highest pattern of virtue, but the strongest incentive to its practice; and has exercised 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 all the exhortations of moralists.¹³

You simply cannot deny the moral integrity of this man's life. When you see him, you are immediately struck by it. Such a thing is recounted time and again, not just in the writings of men throughout history, but in the Gospel records themselves.

- Do you remember when he was bound and brought before the Sanhedrin? Matthew tells us that "the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death, but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward" (Matt. 26:59-60).
- And when at last they thought they had found something that might stick, even then Mark tells us the people couldn't get their stories straight (Mark 14:59).
- And when Jesus is then delivered to Pilate, while the chief priests and the elders are hurling accusations at him, he gives no defense for himself. And we're told that Pilate "was greatly amazed" (Matt. 27:14). And we read later that he is convinced of Jesus' innocence: "[W]hat evil has he done?" (Matt. 27:23). Even Pilate's own wife sends word to him from her chamber: "Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream" (Matt. 27:19). John tells us that he "sought to release him" (John 19:12), but the Jews would not have it.
- So they take him to be crucified. And as he hangs there, while most are mocking, and spitting, and gambling for his garments, there is one man—a criminal hanging on a cross next to him—who cries out in protest: "[T]his man has done nothing wrong" (Luke 23:41).

¹³ William Edward Hatpole Lecky, *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne* (New York, NY: D. Appleton and Co., 1903), 8, quoted in Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), 160.

- And as Jesus breathes his last, a great many more come to this very same conclusion. The centurion, a Roman officer who would have been in charge of this whole affair, seeing the manner in which Jesus dies confesses: "Certainly this man was innocent!" (Luke 23:47).
- And then Luke tells us that "all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts" (Luke 23:48). It's a sign of grief, and perhaps even of repentance. "What have we done?!"

The quality of Jesus' character was and is incontestable, undeniable, irrefutable. He is not a liar. As Peter says of him: "He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth" (1 Pet. 2:22).

Option #4: Lunatic

Here we come to the next possibility, although, now having already established the quality of his character, it should seem a near impossibility.

Perhaps he's a lunatic. He believed he was the Son of God, all right. He believed it enough to die for it, sure. But all this proves is the sad fact that he was crazy—like those men you pass by on the side of the road, always mumbling to themselves, talking to people no one sees, using words which no one in their right mind can even comprehend.

But does such a portrait fit this man from Nazareth? Against this we might put forward evidence from yet another angle . . .

The Soundness of His Mind

There is a reason people, though they want to disregard him as Lord, still feel they must at least honor him as luminary. And it is because of this: the soundness of his mind. The wisdom of his teaching and life cannot be denied.

As psychiatrist J.T. Fisher asserts:

If you were to take the sum total of all authoritative articles ever written by the most qualified of psychologists and psychiatrists on the

subject of mental hygiene—if you were to combine them and refine them and cleave out the excess verbiage—if you were to take the whole of the meat and none of the parsley, and if you were to have these unadulterated bits of pure scientific knowledge concisely expressed by the most capable of living poets, you would have an awkward and incomplete summation of the Sermon on the Mount. And it would suffer immeasurably through comparison. For nearly two thousand years the Christian world has been holding in its hands the complete answer to its restless and fruitless yearnings. Here . . . rests the blueprint for successful human life with optimum mental health and contentment.¹⁴

*Truly, it is not the one speaking these words
who is the fool, but any who would
choose to disregard them!*

We walk by those madmen on the road and have forgotten what they were muttering about by dinnertime. But Jesus' words have been echoing through the chambers of history for millennia now. Why? Because they are sound and wise and unmistakably sane.

Truly, it is not the one speaking these words who is the fool, but any who would choose to disregard them!

¹⁴ J.T. Fisher and L.S. Hawley, *A Few Buttons Missing* (Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott, 1951), 273, quoted in Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), 162.

Option #5: Lord

So if Jesus is not a legend, and we accept that the New Testament speaks of him accurately; if he is not a mere luminary due to the grandiose and exclusive nature of his claims; if he is not a liar as evidenced by the exemplary quality of his character; if he is not a lunatic as made plain by the soundness of his mind; what then are we left with?

Well, we are left to take him at his word. We are left to receive him as he is presented to us in the Scriptures—that he lived a sinless life, died a sinner's death, and rose again from the dead whereby God has made him to be Savior and Lord of all, including us, if only we would repent and believe.

As Paul the apostle declares in Romans 10:9: "[I]f you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

* * *

So now we must face the mounting pressure of that question we asked at the front: "But who do you say that I am?" (Matt. 16:15). Enough with the discussion of what others are saying about him. Eventually, it must come down to this deeply personal level. Everyone who has ever lived will have to stand before almighty God and give an account for his or her own answer to the question.

Grandma's confession will not shelter you. Daddy's faith will not save you. "But who do you say that I am?" At the bottom, it is you who must wrestle with this question for yourself.

And I hope I have sufficiently made the case here in this booklet. Jesus is not a legend. He is not a mere luminary. He is certainly no liar nor lunatic.

He is the *Lord*!

I suppose the only thing left to ask then is: if, in fact, he *is* the Lord, is he *your* Lord?!

For a brief yet beautiful summary of the gospel, watch this two minute video: <https://youtu.be/sAy4PLZg9rw>.



Now, let's reflect on all we've been discussing in this little booklet. Has anything shifted in your opinion of Jesus—who he was in history, who he is to you personally? What evidence seemed compelling? What evidence still seemed lacking? What questions or objections do you still have (if any)? Would you be interested in learning more? Are you open to the idea of placing your faith in Jesus as the Christ—as Lord, Savior, and Treasure of your life? If not, what's holding you back? If yes, how can we help you take the next step?!

Want More?

If you are wanting to engage the subject matter found in this booklet further, you might consider the following resources:

- *Who Is Jesus?* by Greg Gilbert
- *The Reason for God* by Tim Keller
- *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis
- *Basic Christianity* by John Stott

Need Help?

Our leaders at Mercy Hill would love to help you take this next step! If you'd like someone to chat, pray, or read with along the way please don't hesitate to reach out to us at info@mercyhillchurch.org.

What's Next?

If you've turned from your sin and placed your trust in Jesus for forgiveness and new life, then you are ready to check out the next step: *Be Baptized*. Find more info at the Next Steps Table on a Sunday or online at mercyhillchurch.org.

At Mercy Hill, we want to be a church open to those seeking, inquiring, and even skeptical of the Christian faith. We don't look down on your questions, we invite them. We want to be a safe place for you to discuss them. We've all probably asked them at one point ourselves. We may even be asking them right now!

The whole complex of the Christian faith rises or falls with the person and work of Jesus. If he is not who he said he is, if he has not done what the Scriptures say he did, then it all comes crumbling down and we Christians are most to be pitied (1 Cor. 15:19). Therefore, the place to begin one's investigation into Christianity is with an investigation of Jesus (the *Christ*) himself. This Next Steps Resource has been created to help you do just that!



Consider Jesus

For those skeptical or curious about Christianity and the claims of Jesus.



Be Baptized

For those ready to say yes to Jesus and "go public" with their faith.



Walk the Sacred Path

For those wanting to grow in their devotional lives (e.g. Bible reading, prayer).



Become a Member

For those interested in going all in with this local church and committing to "be the body" here and now together.



Join a Home Group

For those wanting to move towards community and live on mission for Jesus with others in the church.



Pursue Discipleship

For those interested in going deeper in their faith and growing more in the image of Christ.



Use Your Gifts

For those interested in identifying the gifts God has given them and using those gifts to serve in the church.



Spread the News

For those interested in evangelistic training and opportunities.



Serve the City

For those interested in getting their hands and feet dirty in love for others in our city and world.

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