



Who Is Jesus?

by Don Everts

The Christian Preoccupation with Jesus

My name is Don and I am a Christian. One of the things you'll learn about me in this booklet is that I find Jesus pretty fascinating. Now this may not come as a surprise to you. Christians the world over, though they vary greatly in appearance and culture and their churches have different shapes and different sounding songs ... Christians the world over can't seem to stop talking about Jesus. You ever notice this? Sometimes this can seem a bit overdone. You ever sit next to someone on a plane who just wants to talk about Jesus the whole time? Or have a stranger knock on your door because they want to talk to you about Jesus? This preoccupation with Jesus can begin to feel a bit simplistic and naïve after a time.

There's a story of a young child at a "Children's Moment" during church. The pastor, sitting with the children begins by asking: "What's small and brown and lives in your yard and likes nuts?" One small child raises his hand: "Well, it sounds a lot like a squirrel, but I'm gonna go with ... Jesus?!" Let's be honest: it's not only children that can be like this. Christians are kind of all about Jesus.

Right from the Beginning

The thing is, this has always been the case; this isn't a new phenomenon. The church has always been a Jesus-consumed group of people. From the very beginning, their conversations and letters and sermons and songs were saturated with his name. Their communities were preoccupied with the simple stories of his life.

Jesus, it would be safe to say, made quite an impression during his short life. This could very well be the greatest understatement of the last two millennia. From what we can tell, Jesus led a mostly quiet life until he was about 30. And when he was baptized by his cousin, John, in the Jordan River, he began his short, perhaps three-year-long career. And humanity hasn't stopped talking about him since. Right from the beginning people were stunned by Jesus. Consider a few lines taken from some of the earliest accounts of Jesus' few short years of work:

"The men were amazed and asked, 'What kind of man is this?'" (Matthew 8:27a)

"The crowd was amazed and said, 'Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel'" (Matthew 9:33b).

"All the people were astonished" (Matthew 12:23a).

"They were greatly astonished" (Matthew 19:25b).

"This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, 'We have never seen anything like this!'" (Mark 2:12b)

"At this they were completely astonished" (Mark 5:42b).

"They were completely amazed" (Mark 6:51b).

“The disciples were even more amazed” (Mark 10:26a).

“And the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid” (Mark 10:32b).

“Pilate was amazed” (Mark 15:5b).

“And they were all amazed at the greatness of God” (Luke 9:43).

“Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, ‘We have seen remarkable things today’” (Luke 5:26).

We have seen remarkable things today. And that’s just a short sampling. Everywhere Jesus went folks were surprised. And this is quite noteworthy. It’s a theme worth paying attention to. If we saw only a few shocked people in the accounts, it would be nothing worthy of note. But what do you do with whole crowds that are shocked? What about large multitudes standing with gaping jaws? What do you do with the fact that even Jesus’ detractors were stunned by him?

What Kind of Man?

Consider that last little account listed above:

“Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, ‘We have seen remarkable things today’” (Luke 5:26).

Pulling back to look at the context (earlier in Luke chapter 5), we see that it’s been a pretty typical day for Jesus. He teaches all day in a house crowded with his disciples, the curious, and a gaggle of sworn enemies who are looking for dirt on him. During the day Jesus heals a man, forgives sins, and responds to outspoken critics of his healing and forgiveness. A Jesus kind of day. The kind of day we’re used to reading about. But at the end of that day we’re told that ...

“Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, ‘We have seen remarkable things today’” (Luke 5:26).

I’ve begun to really like this little verse from Luke 5. It’s such an intriguing, full sentence.

What does it mean, for example, that amazement seized everyone there? I can imagine being amazed or intrigued or interested, but amazement *seized* everyone, and they were “filled with awe.” That sounds kind of extreme.

And how about that term “everyone”? Luke emphasizes that “everyone” was seized by amazement—which means even the enemies who came there to purposefully look for dirt on Jesus. That’d be like a Republican journalist going to a Democratic Convention for some juicy sound bites and leaving ... utterly caught up in what was going on there! That’d never happen, right? But it did with Jesus’ enemies after spending a day with him. How can that be? What was it in Jesus that so caught them off guard that their stiff, defensive posture and strong agenda simply melted away into amazement?

Luke also tells us that they glorified God and were awestruck at the same time. At the same time! What was it in Jesus that made them worship God *and* be really afraid? And what was it that made them sit around afterwards chatting away about the “remarkable things” they’d seen that day?

What kind of man would evoke this kind of response in people? I’ve never met a man or woman like that. I’ve met some interesting people, and the closest I’ve ever come to experiencing something like this was the first time I met a moose face to face.

Seized by a Moose!

Seriously. You see, I was at a condo near Breckenridge with some friends. We were studying the Bible actually, minding our own business. When all of a sudden I felt a sort of ... presence. I looked up and realized everyone else was looking up, and then we all turned our heads to the large sliding glass door and there, staring back at us was a moose.

A side note about moose is in order here. Moose are large. Really large. Pictures never do them justice. In pictures they just look like large horses with strange, flattened antlers. But when you see a moose up close (especially if it is on the other side of your sliding glass door), you realize just how utterly mammoth these animals are. Our moose, for example, was so immense that its legs were standing on the ground *below* our large deck, but it was still tall enough and long enough to get its large face and antlers right up to our sliding glass door.

This huge serene presence simply took over our room. We were awestruck. No one asked for permission to halt our Bible study (I remember, I was leading); no one asked what we should do; no one used the break to go to the bathroom. We were transfixed by the sheer size and presence of this creature. “They were filled with awe,” Luke wrote. I get it. I’ve experienced that!

And I also understand what it’s like to be simultaneously filled with praise ... and fear. We were definitely impressed by this moose (Look at its nostrils! Oh my gosh! How long is its neck? What are those huge flat antler things?), but when it snorted once and made a quick move we all jumped; a couple folks screamed; I may or may not have peed my pants a little. I feel like I got a small taste of what Luke described: they were praising God but filled with fear.

And I think I know why they said to each other afterward: “We have seen remarkable things today.” After our moose grew bored with us and romped off through the forest, knocking down small trees in its way, we spent the next 30 minutes with silly grins and uncontrollable energy just jabbering like little school kids about how amazing it was, about each little detail we remembered: Did you see how it knocked over those small trees as it just ... romped away? Dude, did you see how tall its legs were? I could have walked right under its belly! No way that just happened! We have seen remarkable things today!

So I’ve had a small taste of this reaction Luke describes ... but it was with a dangerous, many- antlered moose. Jesus physically was a simple carpenter, yet he evoked this kind of response from people. And this instance in Luke 5 isn’t an exception. There are dozens of verses about amazed crowds and individuals. There are a dozen instances where people came up to Jesus and just knelt on the ground before him. Lots of people, all kinds of people kneeling at his feet. There are dozens of verses of people responding—stunned—by the words of Jesus. Everywhere Jesus went it was as if a moose had walked into the room. How do you account for this? This is too loud a chorus to be ignored as insignificant. How do we make sense of these reactions?

Option One: Untrustworthy Accounts?

One option open to us is that the gospels, from which all these records have been taken, are untrustworthy. How do you explain the way Jesus affected people? The same way you explain away Superman flying: it’s made up. It’s a comic book. It’s not a trustworthy source. Personally, I don’t find that a very compelling explanation.

I find little historical reason to doubt the gospels.

Read Josephus or Tacitus or Suetonius or other historical accounts of the period discussed and there is a simple and plain agreement about places and people and political leaders and parties and historical events, and they mention Jesus. The events in the gospels don’t take place on Atlantis or on some other planet. They take place in Palestine: the years and dates and names are all explicit, all on the surface ... and all accord with what other histories tell us about the times. It just doesn’t read like a comic book.

As NT Wright (something of an expert in Second Temple Judaism, this period of history) puts it, “The portrait of Jesus we find in the canonical gospels makes sense within the world of Palestine in the 20’s and 30’s of the first century. Above all, it makes coherent sense in itself. The Jesus who emerges is thoroughly believable as a figure of history” (NT Wright, *Simply Christian*, 99). So, I find little historical reason to doubt the gospels.

I find little textual reason to doubt the gospels.

There is good reason to assume that the gospels we read today are the same as when they were first scratched onto papyrus. No one’s messed with them. In the study of texts and textual transmission, these books have the strongest pedigree of any ever written. For example, by way of comparison, consider the book originally written by Herodotus between 400-500 B.C. The earliest copy of the manuscript still in existence (that we could all get on a plane and go

and look at today) was created in 900 A.D. There are eight such early copies in existence. Even though it's a 1,300-year span between the original writing and the earliest copy still in existence, historians and textual critics value and seriously study the copies of Herodotus that we have today.

The same is true for many other ancient books: for Thucydides, we have eight copies of the oldest manuscript which date 1,300 years after the original was penned. We could fly and see nine or ten of the oldest copies of Caesar's *Gallic War*, which date around 900 years from when it was first written. The New Testament? These gospels? The oldest complete manuscripts (Old and New Testament together) we could fly and look at date from only 300 years after the originals were penned. Not 1,300, 300.

Actually we'd have to fly to a few cities. The oldest complete manuscript we could go look at is called the *Codex Sinaiticus*, but it's actually spread out in four libraries: The British Library, National Library of Russia, St. Catherine's Monastery in Sinai, and Leipzig University Library. (Though you can just go online and see it at www.codexsinaiticus.org.) The oldest single fragment of a gospel we have is called *Papyrus 52*, which is dated to just 35 years after the gospel was written (Michael Kruger, *Canon Revisted*, 210-211). Not 1,300, 35.

And here's the thing: there aren't just eight or ten of these ancient manuscripts still in existence, but more than 5,000 of these ancient copies exist—just in Greek alone! The official number is kept at the Institute for New Testament Research in Munster, Germany, and they put it at 5,773—in Greek alone. (Kruger, 208) These are both papyrus and codex, and many of them are fragmentary, but the average Greek New Testament manuscript is over 450 pages long! (Daniel Wallace, *Revisiting the Corruption of the New Testament*, 28). Textual Critic FJA Hort observed, "In the variety and fullness of the evidence on which it rests the texts of the New Testament stand absolutely and unapproachably alone amongst ancient prose writings" (*The New Testament in the Original Greek*, 561).

Even if the 20,000 handwritten manuscripts of the New Testament that we have in various languages (over 2.6 million pages of preserved texts!) (Wallace, 28) were lost to us, we would still have an accurate copy of the New Testament because the early Christian writers quoted the gospels and other New Testament books so often in their own writings. We've discovered to date over one million quotations from the New Testament in other ancient documents, from which we could reconstitute practically the entire New Testament (Wallace, 28).

And consider too that the early Christian scribes (who copied these manuscripts) from the originals had an extremely high level of organization and sophistication (Kruger, 186). From the beginning, Christians were known as a "bookish" people—in fact this is part of what distinguished them from surrounding religions in the Greco-Roman world—their prolific production of manuscripts and commitment to an authoritative body of scripture (Kruger, 181). Given all these facts it's clear why it's been said that textually Christians have "an embarrassment of riches" (Wallace, 29). For all these reasons, I find little textual reason to doubt that what we are holding here is what they wrote back then.

I also find little literary reason to doubt the gospels.

It's written as history, a record of the events described. It's been said that the authors of the New Testament were writing with an agenda, and so we can't trust what they wrote. Well, I agree that they wrote with an agenda, but this only makes me trust what they wrote even more! Why? Because of what their agenda was. How can we know what their agenda was? We can ask them! If you read the New Testament asking, "Why did you do your writing?" You find a consensus answer. For example:

John (John, I, II, III John, Revelation): "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the word of life. ... We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ" (I John 1:1,3). I touched the moose! In other words: we saw something and we are telling you about it.

I & II Peter stand behind the gospel of Mark. "For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty" (II Peter 1:16). You think I'm clever enough to make this up?

Luke wasn't a first-hand eyewitness, but he penned Luke and Acts, which percentage-wise, is a large chunk of the New Testament. "Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they

were handed down to us by those who from the very first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word ... since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account ... so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:1-2, 3b, 4).

Paul (13 NT books): "For what I received, I passed on to you ..." (I Corinthians 15:3a); "Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you" (II Timothy 1:14a). And how were they to guard this good deposit? He tells them: "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others" (II Timothy 2:2).

These authors clearly did have an agenda, an agenda that governed their writing: for the eyewitnesses to record what they saw. And for everyone else to accurately receive and pass on these eyewitness accounts—with an extreme attention to accuracy. Because this was the strong agenda of the church, Paul encouraged churches to choose a certain type of leader, in his words, "He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught" (Titus 1:9a).

Consider that all of Jesus' apostles were a product of the synagogue school system of the time. All boys from 7-14 years of age were in school six days a week learning the Hebrew Scriptures. The method of learning: accurate memorization of mass quantities of teachings. They were trained from a young age to hear a teaching orally and commit it to memory. Through repetition and various techniques, they could do it. As Hillel, a noted Jewish teacher of the time, puts it, "One who repeats his text 100 times is not to be compared to he who repeats it 101 times."

Careful research has revealed that Jesus employed many of these same memory techniques in his manner of teaching and training his disciples (repetition, parable, turns of phrase). In fact, he employed even more methods to carefully and purposefully train his disciples to remember his curriculum: having them go and repeat his teachings with others and then come back and report in, attaching a teaching to a memorable moment and experience (Hans Bayer, *A Theology of Mark*, 13).

Jesus knew that he would be sending his disciples on with his teachings. He even revealed on one occasion that the stories of his life were going to be carried around the world (see Mark 14:9). Heaven and earth would pass away, Jesus insisted, before his words would.

And so it's not surprising at all that his followers had such a strong, singular agenda: to repeat his teachings and the story of his life and death and resurrection. And it's not surprising that they were dogged about that, looking for leaders who would "hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught." No wonder they had such a strong agenda in their writing. Given what that agenda was I find little literary reason to doubt the gospels.

In the end, it seems reasonable to me (for the reasons I have given) that what we have in the Bible (all this amazement and awestruck reaction, etc.) is an accurate account—that's really the effect Jesus had on people. So, again, how do we account for all this astonishment over Jesus?

Option Two: Jesus' Identity

Maybe there was something ... special about Jesus. After all, Jesus claimed he was special. It's quite possible to account for all the amazement, and falling at his feet, and stunned silences ... if we look at what Jesus said plainly about himself. Ask the moose, in other words. And what did Jesus have to say about himself? How did he answer the question: "Who is Jesus?" Consider just the "I am" statements Jesus made:

"Then Jesus declared, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty'" (John 6:35).

"When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life'" (John 8:12).

[Jesus said,] "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11).

"Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die'" (John 11:25).

"Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me'" (John 14:6).

Anyone else notice a theme here? There's a variety of images, but Jesus seemed to be trying to get across something about his identity: that he was no ordinary man. In fact, his language here would have been unambiguous to his hearers. The way Jesus says "I am" while grammatically correct, is an uncommon way of saying "I am" in the original language. And it happens to be the exact way God said "I am" when Moses asked God at the burning bush what his name was (see Exodus 3:13-14). God at the time said "I am," and Jesus is here purposefully using the same construction, which was not subtle to the people he was talking to.

How un-subtle was Jesus' use of this God way of saying "I am"? Consider how the Jewish leaders responded to Jesus saying "I am": "Jesus answered, 'before Abraham was born, I am!' At this, they picked up stones to stone him" (John 8:58b-59a). And Jesus stated it boldly when asked who he was, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). Ultimately, he would be put to death by his contemporaries for claiming that he was God incarnate: God in the flesh.

Consider also the fact that Jesus healed sick people, calmed stormy seas, exorcised demons, and even raised someone from the dead! Jesus seemed to be exercising authority over the physical world, natural world, spiritual realm, and even death itself! Who is Jesus? As Paul put it, "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (Colossians 2:9).

If what Jesus said about himself was true, that he was God in the flesh, then that would explain a lot. No wonder people were amazed by him. No wonder they felt drawn to bow before him. No wonder his words seemed so ... holy, so different. No wonder the authors of the New Testament wrote, recorded the details of his life and death and teachings. No wonder Christians throughout the centuries have been so preoccupied with him. No wonder Christians today can't seem to stop taking about him.

Who Is Jesus?

The Christian church considers itself to be the carrier of good news brought in the form of one Jesus of Nazareth. And from age to age, this proclamation about him is handed on, announced anew to each generation.

I was a 16-year-old boy when I received this news. I had grown up in church, as many in our country do, but without hearing much about Jesus. It was while spending time with friends at a camp nestled in the stunning Canadian wilderness that I fully held in my hands the "good deposit" that Paul wrote of. I became convinced that it was true, that Jesus was from God. And when I had answered that question (Who is Jesus?) my life shifted. It was like I was at a 45-degree angle. I felt a bond with Jesus that could only be described by the slightly inadequate word "relationship." (That's almost too cliché to write.) And this experience is not unique to me.

Napoleon Bonaparte, founder of a great empire (who knew a thing or two about kingdoms), observed with shocking humility, "In defiance of time and space, the soul of man, with all its powers and faculties, becomes an annexation to the empire of Christ. All who sincerely believe in Him, experience that remarkable, supernatural love toward Him ... Time, the great destroyer, is powerless to extinguish this sacred flame; time can neither exhaust its strength nor put a limit to its range. This is it, which strikes me most; I have often thought of it. This is which proves to me quite convincingly the Divinity of Jesus Christ." (Quoted in Henry Parry Liddon, *Liddon's Bampton Lectures 1866* [London: Rivingtons, 1869], 148.) These are the conclusions of Napoleon.

Who is Jesus? Ultimately, that is for us each to answer. I stand in a long line of pastors and emperors, saints and sinners, farmers and soldiers and beggars and mothers and children who answer this question the same way: Jesus is God in the flesh. In another booklet we ask the question "Why did Jesus die?" But for now, I can only recommend that this question (Who is Jesus?) is a question worth asking, worth pondering, worth taking some time to consider.

Don Everts is an award-winning author of more than a dozen books about Jesus of Nazareth and the adventure of being one of his disciples. As a college minister, ordained pastor, and friendly neighbor, Don has been getting into conversations about Jesus for more than 30 years.



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