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Did the Apostles Believe Jesus Is God?

Were the eyewitnesses, who heard Jesus' words and saw his miraculous deeds, convinced that he is equal in every way with his Father? Or did they think that Jesus was merely a higher created being or a great prophet like Moses?

To sort out truth from fiction, we need to go back to the words of the apostles who were there when Jesus walked the earth and wrote their testimonies of what they saw and heard. We also want to examine what the early church fathers believed and taught since several of them knew and heard the apostles teach.

The Eyewitnesses

Jesus spent three years with his disciples, teaching them about God and explaining to them the deep truths of God's Word. During those three years, Jesus performed numerous miracles, made audacious claims, and lived a righteous life. After his resurrection, these eyewitnesses wrote down many of Jesus' words and deeds.

Simon Peter, one of Jesus' disciples, wrote of Jesus' glory after his resurrection:

We saw it with our own eyes: Jesus resplendent with light from God the Father.... We couldn't be more sure of what we saw and heard—God's glory, God's voice (2 Peter 1:16-17, The Message).

But does the fact that the apostles saw God's glory and heard God's voice through Jesus mean that they regarded him as God? New Testament scholar A. H. McNeile explains,

...no sooner had the Life of Jesus ended in apparent failure and shame than the great body of Christians—not an individual here and there, but the mass of the Church—passed over at once to the fixed belief that He was God.¹

Those who deny Jesus' deity say that the apostles taught that Jesus is God's supreme creation, and that the Father alone is the eternal God. So, to clarify their beliefs about Jesus, we will examine their words, asking three essential questions:

1. Did the apostles and early Christians worship Jesus and pray to him as Lord?
2. Did the apostles teach that Jesus is the Creator written of in Genesis?
3. Did the apostles worship Jesus as Preeminent in the universe?

Did the Apostles Pray to Jesus as Lord?

After Jesus ascended, the apostles stunned both Jew and Roman by proclaiming Jesus as “Lord”.² Both the apostles and early Christians did the unthinkable and worshiped Jesus, even praying to him as if he was God. Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” as he was being stoned to death (Acts 7:59).

Other believers soon joined Stephen, who even while they were facing death, “never ceased for a single day...to teach and to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus” (Acts 5:42). The apostles, most of whom were martyred, passed on their knowledge of Jesus to church fathers who carried their message onto the next generation.

Although letters from early church fathers were written too late to be included in the New Testament, they strongly emphasize the apostles’ teaching that Jesus is both God and man.

For example, Ignatius, a disciple of the apostle John, wrote about Jesus’ 2nd coming, “Look for him that is above the times, him who has not times, him who is invisible.” In a letter to Polycarp, who was also a disciple of the apostle John, Ignatius states, “Jesus is God”, “God incarnate,” and to the Ephesians he writes, ... “God Himself appearing in the form of a man, for the renewal of eternal life” (Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians 4:13). Clement of Rome in AD 96 also taught Jesus’ deity, saying, “We ought to think of Jesus Christ as of God” (2nd Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians 1:1).

So, the idea that belief in Jesus’ deity was invented by the church decades after the apostles were dead simply doesn’t agree with the historical facts. It’s clear that the early church was merely continuing the apostles’ belief in Jesus’ deity.

As the early church grew, Gnostics and other cults began teaching that Jesus was a created being, inferior to the Father. This came to a head in the fourth century when Arius, a popular preacher from Libya, persuaded many leaders that Jesus wasn’t fully God.

Then in AD 325, at the Council of Nicaea, church leaders met to resolve the issue of whether Jesus is the Creator, or merely a creation.³ Over 300 church leaders overwhelmingly affirmed the long-held Christian conviction and New Testament teaching that Jesus is fully God.⁴

Did the Apostles Believe Jesus was the Creator?

But did the apostles believe Jesus was the one who created everything—including us?

In Genesis the God of the Bible is revealed as Creator of everything from tiny quantum particles to over a trillion galaxies averaging 100 billion stars each. He also created the complex coding of DNA that organizes proteins to develop all living life forms including us.

The prophet Isaiah confirms that God (Yahweh) is the Creator:

I (Yahweh) am the one who made the earth and created people to live on it.... I stretched out the heavens.... All the millions of stars are at my command!" (Isaiah 45:11a, 12, 13b).

The fact that God created the universe and everything in it is foundational to both Old Testament and New Testament theology.

The Apostle John's Testimony

When Jesus' disciples gazed at the stars on dark evenings, they didn't dream or imagine that the Creator of those stars was in their very presence. Although Jesus healed the blind and deaf, calmed storms, and even raised Lazarus from the dead, John and the other disciples saw him as a man with real physical needs for food, rest and sleep.

Yet once they saw Jesus alive after his crucifixion, their eyes were open to his deity. They immediately began spreading the word that Jesus was both God and man.

The apostle John, inspired by the Holy Spirit, begins his Gospel by revealing Jesus as the eternal "Word" who created everything:

In the beginning there was the Word. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. All things were made by him, and nothing was made without him. In him there was life, and that life was the light of all people (John 1:1,3-4, NCV).

Let's look closely at what John, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, is saying here:

1. the "Word" existed before creation
2. the "Word" is the Creator who created everything
3. the "Word" is God⁵

John has told us that the Word is eternal, created everything that exists, and is God. But he doesn't tell us whether the Word is just a force or a person until verse 14, which makes it clear that John is speaking about Jesus as the Son of God.

The Word became a human and lived among us. We saw his glory—the glory that belongs to the only Son of the Father—and he was full of grace and truth (John 1:14, NCV).

John also refers to Jesus as the Word in his epistle,

Christ is the Word of Life. He was from the beginning. We have heard Him and have seen Him with our own eyes. We have looked at Him and put our hands on Him (1 John 1:1, NIV).

The apostle John tells us that “nothing exists that he (Jesus) didn't make.” If nothing existed apart from him, it follows that Jesus couldn't have been a created being.

Paul's Testimony

Unlike John, the apostle Paul, (formerly Saul) was a bitter opponent and persecutor of Christians until Jesus revealed himself to him in a vision. Years later, Paul writes about Jesus as the Creator to the Colossians:

He (Jesus) is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of creation. For by Him all things were created...all things have been created by Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together (Colossians 1:15-17, NASB).

Paul reveals several important things in this passage:

1. Jesus is the exact image of God.
2. Jesus is the “first-born” of creation.
3. Jesus created everything.
4. Jesus is the reason for creation.
5. Jesus existed before everything.
6. Jesus holds creation together.

What does “exact image of God” mean? Bible scholar F. F. Bruce remarks: “To call Christ the image of God is to say that in Him the being and nature of God have been perfectly manifested—that in Him the invisible has become visible.”⁶ Thus, God being

visible in Christ coincides with Jesus' own words to Philip, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

In verse 15, the Greek word for "first-born" (prototokos) means "'supreme' rather than in the temporal sense of 'born after.'"⁷ According to Bruce, Paul is referring to "Christ's pre-existence and cosmic activity in creation, and "denotes not only Jesus' priority but also his primacy."⁸ What makes this clear is verse 16 which tells us that everything in the universe was created both through Jesus Christ, and also for him.

In verse 17 we see the eternal Christ sustaining creation. According to Paul, every atom, each DNA strand, and trillions of galaxies are held together by the power of Jesus Christ.

The Book of Hebrews' Testimony

The New Testament book of Hebrews⁹ also reveals Jesus as the Creator of everything. Its opening passage mirrors Paul's words to the Colossians:

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word (Hebrews 1:1-3, NIV).

Just as John and Paul reveal, the author of Hebrews tells us that prior to Jesus becoming a man, God created the universe through him. And Hebrews also reveals Jesus Christ as the one who sustains it.

Hebrews 1:3 speaks of Jesus as the "perfect imprint and very image of God's nature."¹⁰ The Greek word here means that "the Son is the effulgence, the out-raying of the glory of God's glory."¹¹ This statement, that Jesus is the "perfect imprint" of the infinite God, confirms that the apostles believed Jesus is fully God.

The author of Hebrews then goes on to tell us that Jesus is not only superior to the prophets, but he also is far above the angels. "This shows that God's Son is far greater than the angels, just as the name God gave him is far greater than their names" (Hebrews 1:4).

John Piper explains why Jesus is vastly superior to angels:

No angel in heaven ever received such honor and affection as the Son has received from all eternity from his Father. As great and wonderful as angels are, they do not rival the Son.... The Son of God is not an angel—not even the highest archangel. Rather God says, “Let God’s angels worship him!” (Hebrews 1:6). The Son of God is worthy of all the worship that the hosts of heaven can give—not to mention ours.”¹²

The author of Hebrews then removes all doubt regarding Jesus’ deity:

“But as to the Son, He [the Father] says to Him, ‘Your throne, O God, is forever and ever....’” (Hebrews 1:8, Amplified).

Later in Hebrews, we learn that Jesus Christ “is the same yesterday, today, and forever,” a clear statement of his eternal Deity (Hebrews 13:8). A created being is not the same today as yesterday because there would have been a time when he didn’t exist.

It would be difficult to construe these passages in Hebrews to mean anything other than the fact that Jesus is the God spoken of in the Old Testament, who along with His Father and the Holy Spirit, created the universe.

Pre-Eminent One

The early Christians were accused by the Romans of stealing glory from Caesar, and by the Jews of robbing glory from God (Yahweh). Christianity is criticized by some as being “too Jesus focused.” But is that what the apostles thought? Let’s hear again from Paul as he writes to the Colossians about Jesus.

He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell (Colossians 1:19, ESV).

Paul writes that God is pleased to have Jesus as the preeminent person in the universe. But the Old Testament clearly teaches that God will never relinquish his preeminence to a created being (Deuteronomy. 6:4-5; Psalm 83:18; Proverbs 16:4; Isaiah 42:11). Isaiah speaks clearly of God’s (Yahweh’s) preeminence.

Let all the world look to me for salvation! For I am God; there is no other. I have sworn by my own name, and I will never go back on my word: Every knee will bow to me, and every tongue will confess allegiance to my name (Isaiah 45:22-23, NLT).

But how can both Jesus and Yahweh be preeminent? In Genesis the Hebrew word used for God the Creator is plural (Elohim). And, when Isaiah states that God alone created everything, the Hebrew word for God (Yahweh) is also plural. Dr. Norman Geisler concludes,

Biblically speaking, there is more than enough evidence to conclude that the fundamental nature of God is portrayed by the Scriptures as a plural oneness.¹³

Paul attributes to Jesus the same words of honor Isaiah attributes to Yahweh:

Though he was God, he did not demand and cling to his rights as God. He made himself nothing; he took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. And in human form he obediently humbled himself even further by dying a criminal's death on a cross.

Because of this, God raised him up to the heights of heaven and gave him a name that is above every other name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:6-11, NLT).

This passage reveals that before Jesus became a man, he had the full rights of the Godhead. Paul concludes by attributing to Jesus the worship Isaiah said belongs only to Yahweh, "that every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord."

Over seven hundred years before Christ, God tells us through Isaiah, "every knee shall bow to him (Yahweh)." That he is "the Lord, the King of Israel." "The Redeemer." "The First and the Last." Zechariah speaks of God as "the King, the Lord of Hosts who will judge the earth."

Note the parallels between Yahweh in the Old Testament and Jesus in the New Testament:

- "Every Knee shall bow to Jesus" (Philippians 2:11,12)
- Jesus is the "Alpha and Omega—God" (Revelation 21: 6, 7)
- Jesus is the "First and the Last—God" (Revelation 21:7-22:13)
- Jesus is the "Beginning and the End—God" (Revelation 21:6, 7)
- Jesus is the "Almighty Lord" (Revelation 1:8)
- Jesus is the King of Kings" (Revelation 17:14)

- Jesus is the “Lord of Lords” (Revelation 17:14)

Conclusion

The Christian message is that God the Creator came to earth, allowed men to spit on him, mock him, and nail him to a cross as a supreme sacrifice for our sins. God’s perfect justice could only be satisfied by a mediator who was both man and God, taking on himself payment for our sin. No angel or created proxy would suffice. Such an act of condescension demonstrates the immensity of God’s love and grace, as well as the high value He places upon each of us.

In his parting words to the Ephesian elders, Paul encouraged them to “shepherd the church of God, which he purchased with His own blood (Acts 20:28 NASB). Paul is echoing Zechariah’s prophecy where God (Yahweh) says,

“In that day the Lord will defend the inhabitants of Jerusalem....and they will look on Me whom they have pierced, and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son (Zechariah 12:8a,10b).

Zechariah reveals that the one pierced on the cross was none other than God, himself. Jesus Christ brings Old and New Testaments together like separate instruments harmonizing to create a beautiful symphony. “For, unless Jesus is God, Christianity loses its central theme. But if Jesus is God, all other major Christian doctrines fit together like pieces of a puzzle.”

Kreeft and Tacelli explain:¹⁴

- “If Christ is divine, then the incarnation, or ‘enfleshing’ of God, is the most important event in history. It is the hinge of history. It changes everything.”
- “If Christ is God, then when he died on the cross, heaven’s gate, closed by sin, opened up to us for the first time since Eden. No event in history could be more important to every person on earth than that.”
- “If Christ is God, then, since he is omnipotent and present right now, he can transform you and your life right now as nothing and no one else possibly can.”
- “If Christ is divine, he has a right to our entire lives, including our inner life and our thoughts.”

The apostles made Jesus Lord of their lives, wrote of him as the Creator, and worshiped him as preeminent. These firsthand eyewitnesses were absolutely convinced that God had visited planet earth in the Person of Jesus Christ, who will return as King of kings and Lord of lords, as well as our eternal Judge.

It was because of the apostles unswerving conviction that Jesus was God in the flesh that they willingly gave their lives proclaiming him as both Savior and Lord.

Endnotes