

“The Many Faces of Jesus”

In all three of the synoptic Gospels (in Matthew, Mark, and Luke) Jesus asks his disciples a very important question:

Who do you say that I am?

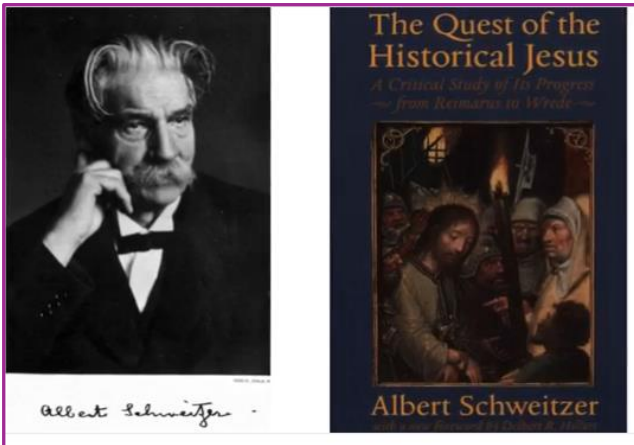
Matthew 16:15; Mark 8:29; Luke 9:20

That question is, in many ways, one of the most important questions that may ever be asked of us. Because how we answer that question, who we say and who we think that Jesus is, that will determine:

- what we expect of him
- what we ask from him
- what we think it means to follow him

The problem is that many times, the way that we answer this question - who we think that Jesus is - is often determined by who we want him to be.

This is even true of those who make a claim to historical and scholarly objectivity. In 1906, the brilliant German scholar Albert Schweitzer published a book entitled “The Quest of the Historical Jesus.”



In that book, he surveyed all the attempts that had been made by historians and scholars of religion from the 18th to the 20th centuries; to get behind the New Testament presentation of Jesus and to try to answer the question, who was Jesus really? The Jesus of history. And do you know what Schweitzer found?

He found that when all these scholars set their minds to the task of answering that question, the conclusions that they came to invariably reflected their own values and opinions. In other words, the Jesus that they found seemed always to be a reflection of who they would want or hope for him to be.

Schweitzer put it like this:

Thus, each successive epoch of theology found its own thoughts in Jesus ... But it was not only each epoch that found its reflection in Jesus; each individual created Him in accordance with his own character. There is no historical task which so reveals a man's true self as the writing of a Life of Jesus. (Albert Schweitzer)

The Irish Catholic priest George Tyrrell made a very similar observation about the work and the writings of Adolf von Harnack, who is probably the greatest church historian of the early 20th century. Harnack was a strong proponent of liberal Protestantism. And when it came to his writings in all of his scholarly work about Jesus, Tyrrell quipped that:

The Christ that Harnack sees, looking back through nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well.



George Tyrrell

But it's not just scholars. It's easy to criticize historians for not recognizing the way that their own prejudices are distorting their scholarship. But the truth is, most people do the same thing. If you look at popular depictions of Jesus in America, you'll find no end of different answers to the question "who do you say that I am?"

Thomas Jefferson famously took a razor blade to his New Testament, and he cut out all the sayings and actions attributed to Jesus that he believed were false. You might think that would be an

incredibly difficult task, but Jefferson found the task obvious and easy.



The real sayings of Jesus, he later wrote, were as easily distinguishable from the false as diamonds in a dunghill, because the true sayings and the true actions of Jesus, Jefferson thought, were simply those that he personally found admirable and reasonable and wise. Because Jesus, of course, much like Jefferson himself, is best understood as an enlightened sage.

That was in the 18th century. That was in the 18th century. In the 19th century, many Americans thought and spoke about Jesus as a kind of sweet savior. Popular hymns talked about him walking and talking in the garden, and of the sweet words that Jesus will say as you speak to him. Popular artistic depictions of Jesus portrayed him as gentle, kind, soft, almost delicate in his looks and embraces.



But in the years that followed, people rejected this gentle, delicate Jesus and replaced him with a more manly redeemer. Popular early 20th century books like Charles Sheldon's "In His Steps" and Bruce Barton's "The Man Nobody Knows" emphasize Jesus strength, his boldness, and his know how. Liberal Protestants like Walter Rauschenbusch - a man who was in many ways the father of what is often called the social gospel - he explicitly repudiated these non-manly portraits of Jesus. There was nothing mushy, nothing sweetly effeminate about Jesus, he wrote.

Jesus was the one that turned again and again on the snarling pack of his pious enemies and made them slink away. He plucked the beard of death and He went into the city and the temple. To utter those withering woes against the dominant class.
(Walter Rauschenbusch)

Meanwhile, on the opposite end of the political and theological spectrum, Billy Sunday - the wildly popular evangelist who had left a baseball career for a life of preaching - was even more direct. Lord save us (he once prayed) from off-handed, flabby-cheeked, brittle-boned, weak-kneed, thin-skinned, pliable, plastic, spineless, effeminate, sissified, three-carrot Christianity.

Jesus was no dough-faced, lick-spittle proposition. Jesus was the greatest scrapper that ever lived.

Billy Sunday



If you look even more broadly in culture, you'll find that there are still countless ways of thinking about and depicting Jesus. Some people portray him as a political revolutionary.



While others depict him as a kind of manly fighter.



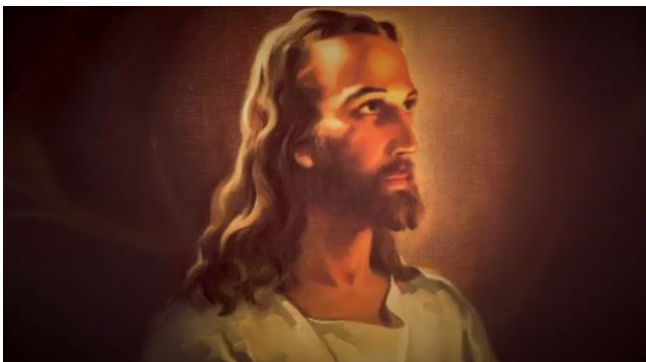
Some emphasize his friendliness.



Others imagine him as an angry prophet, bringing judgment.



The most popular image of Jesus ever created is a painting entitled "Head of Christ," created by the artist Warner Sallman. It was produced in 1940, and by the 21st century it had been copied over 500 million times.



What's remarkable about this image isn't so much what it says about Jesus as what it leaves open to interpretation. You don't know from looking at the painting whether Jesus is kind and gentle or manly and strong, whether he's a wise teacher, a friendly companion, or the incarnation of God himself. And I think that's precisely what made this image so popular for so many different people. Because there's no real context for it, because you can look at it and read into it pretty much whatever you want.

Now, I could go on and on with examples, but I think the point is clear enough. When it comes to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" there have been a lot of different answers given. And much of the time, the way that we answer that question is determined less by what the Gospels really tell us than what parts of the gospels we want to emphasize or listen to.

What we say about Jesus often reveals more about us than it does about him. And this is nothing new.

You might remember that when Jesus first asked his disciples this question, he didn't just ask them who they thought he was, he also asked them what other people were saying.

Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.
(Matthew 16:14)

Those who liked him said many things about him.

- They said that he was a rabbi.
- They called him the Son of David.
- They said he was the Messiah.

Those who didn't like him also had stuff to say.

- They said he was a drunkard
- A friend of sinners
- A blasphemer
- At one point they even went so far as to call him a servant of Beelzebub, of Satan

Of course, Jesus said many different things about himself as well. He said that he was:

- the Christ
- that he was the Son of God
- He called himself the bread of Heaven
- the resurrection
- the good Shepherd
- the way, the truth, the life

If you limit yourself just to the New Testament Gospels and what they have to say, you'll discover that people have said all kinds of different things about Jesus.

But that still doesn't really answer the question, because the question that Jesus really wants his followers to answer isn't, who do other people say that I am? The real question he wants to ask us is the question that I started with.

But who do you say that I am?

Matthew 16:15; Mark 8:29; Luke 9:20

Who do you say that Jesus is? And how do you know that your answer to that question is true? How do you know that you're not just conjuring up a Jesus of your own imagination?

Of course, there's always the possibility that we are entertaining wrong ideas about Jesus, but the best way to avoid that is to continually return to the scriptures and listen to what they have to say to us. That is where who he is - is revealed.

And that is precisely what we'll be doing in this study. In this study, we're going to answer the question that Jesus asked his disciples by looking at several of the correct answers that people gave to this question in Scripture. One of the most common ways that people spoke of Jesus, one of the most common things they said about him was that he was a rabbi, a ***teacher***. But what precisely does that mean? And how should it influence our relationship with him now? Those are the questions that we'll be exploring in the next video.

After that, we'll turn our attention to other names that were given to Jesus:

- ***Son of David***
- ***Lamb of God***
- ***My Lord and my God***

Each of these were things that people said about and to Jesus, and each of them are correct and convey something deeply important about who he is and why he matters.

So whether you've never thought about this question before, or whether you've answered it in your mind a hundred times over, my hope is that throughout this study, that what we think and what we say about Jesus will be more and more conformed to the truth of who he really is, and that we will realize once again why Jesus is so very, very good.