



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

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The Case for Christ Part 4: “Liar, Lunatic, or Lord?”

Matthew 16:13-28; John 14:9-14; Luke 22:66-71;

John 10:19-21 (7-21) John 20:24-29

Here we are (all together now...) “passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ, and radiating that love to every individual.” After all, we’re Auburn Presbyterian Church! That’s what we do!

To radiate that love so people can “get it” and respond to God (which is our goal), we have to connect with them in every possible way, over time. And people are made up of body, emotion, spirit, and thought. The study we’re doing during these weeks of Lent, with Lee Strobel’s *The Case for Christ*, is aimed squarely at the “thought part” of us and others. As we absorb and remember Lee’s questions and content, we are equipped to take that message to others. And when we take the time and energy to absorb this content, and when we think about other people who need God (and everyone does, whether they know it or not), we are demonstrating the love of God for those folks. As Robert Schuller says, “God loves you, and so do I.” Or, as one wag put it, “God loves you, and I’m trying...!”

We’re in the political season, and one of the objectives of campaigns is to try to define your opponent in a limiting or negative way, so that you look like the better choice for the office. You want to plant an image of your opponent in the public’s mind that will steer them away from him or her, and steer people toward voting for you. What people think is important to know. That’s why candidates spend so much money on polls, to find out what people think.

Jesus wanted to know what people thought about him, so he asked, as Matthew 16 records, “Who do people around here say I am?” His disciples offered some of the labels they had heard people using for him. “OK,” Jesus said, “now who do YOU say that I am?” Jesus was especially interested in what those closest to him thought of him. So he asked. It’s a fair question. And this week, Lee Strobel leads us to ask and answer the same question.

C.S. Lewis, the Oxford don who was such an effective advocate for Christianity after World War II, wrote,

“I am trying here to prevent anyone from 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 a 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 up with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that option open to us. He did not intend to.”

(The Case For Christianity, by C. S. Lewis, p. 45)

This is the way Lee Strobel proceeds in his chapter 7 and 8, which we read this week. This time, Strobel is asking the more interior questions: “Was Jesus Really Convinced He Was the Son of God?”, and, if so, “Was Jesus Crazy When He Claimed to be The Son of God?” Once again, Strobel interviews a New Testament scholar and a psychologist to “testify”, as it were, to the answers to these questions. And both men—Ben Witherington and Gary Collins, specifically—do not rely on their own opinions alone, but anchor those opinions in what Jesus said and did, as shown by the New Testament records that Strobel has earlier demonstrated as highly reliable, especially by the standards of their own time.

If anyone looks at the gospel records, immediately you notice how different is the Gospel of John from “Matthew,” “Mark,” and “Luke”. In “John”, Jesus gives long speeches—called “discourses”, among scholars—that often focus on himself—his identity. But also in the other three gospels—called “the synoptics”, among scholars—there is ample evidence in his words and deeds that Jesus did indeed understand himself to be a unique, pioneering ambassador for God. In short, like a prophet, he brought God’s message, and did great deeds. But beyond any prophet, Jesus gave himself up to die at the hands of his own people, suffering the sentence of death for us, because our whole lives we live apart from (or in defiance of) God. That kind of life the Bible calls, “sin”; the thoughts and actions of that kind of life are, “sins”.

This morning I want to take two texts—one from John, and one from Luke—to examine the Bible evidence on whether Jesus was a liar, or a lunatic, or truly The Lord, and what we can do with that, as we obey God in sharing our faith with others.

Open your Bibles with me to Luke 22:66-71. This is part of Jesus’ trial before the council of religious authorities in Jerusalem, just before his crucifixion. Listen with me for God’s Word TO US TODAY, as I read these words aloud. *[text]*

This is a pretty grim setting: a hastily-called kangaroo court--more a deposition than a proper trial. And Jesus calmly faces his accusers. He knows the conclusion has already been reached, and these guys are just looking for evidence. When they ask, he calmly says, “Yes, I am the Son of God.”

This brought the charge of “blasphemy”, which I like to define as “lying about God”. The religious authorities of Israel believed Jesus was lying about God, and as “the guardians of God”, it was their duty to defend God’s reputation. They wanted to remove Jesus because he was a threat to the fragile status of Israel before God.

Let me explain. I think this protective attitude goes all the way back to when Babylon conquered the southern kingdom of Judah in 587 B.C. The prophets had said that defeat of Judah was God's judgment on the nation for leaving the covenant which God had made with them. In short, God had "evicted" them from His land in 587 B.C., and they feared God might do it again in Jesus' time, because Rome was such a threat. So it was up to "the guardians of God" to make the people toe a straight line of religious observance, to keep God happy (so to speak), so God would not punish the people.

Convinced that this Jesus had lied about God, and worried that he and his followers were dragging people into false faith, the "protectors of Israel" shipped Jesus off to the Roman authorities, to do what they could not do themselves. You see, the Law of Moses said the penalty for blasphemy was death by stoning. But because Israel was occupied by Rome, and the Roman government had usurped judicial authority in capital cases, only the Romans could put someone to death.

In the trials of Jesus before Pilate and Herod, just after this text, the Jewish leaders would bring up all kinds of charges they could not make stick, until they hit upon the charge of sedition—riling up the people against Rome, the "Pax Romana". Under the pressure from these same religious authorities, the crowds would yell, "Crucify him!", and at the end Pilate would passively permit Jesus to be crucified in place of a proven terrorist leader, a man named Jesus Bar-Abbas. Pilate seemed afraid of the crowd's riot potential when so many more people were in Jerusalem for the Passover Feast—a time when nationalism ran high and "messiah wannabe's" predictably arose to try to throw the Romans out of the Promised Land--and he just wanted to dispose of this "parochial matter" as quickly as possible.

Jesus was a liar, these religious leaders maintained. But was he?

How about a lunatic—was Jesus "not right in the head" when he claimed to be the Son of God? For that, let's turn to John chapter 10, starting with verse 11. This is part of Jesus' discourse on "The Good Shepherd". Listen again with me for The Word of God. [*John 10:11-31, NIV*]

Jesus is talking about himself. His words in "John" often deal with his self-identity, so this question of "liar, lunatic or Lord" must open up John's gospel, especially. In John's Gospel, whenever you hear Jesus say the phrase, "I am", he is using the words God spoke to Moses at the Burning Bush. Jesus is making "a God-statement". Here, it's "I am" the Good Shepherd.

The Jews—which in John's Gospel means "the guardians of God", the same religious authorities we encountered in Luke's account—can't stand what Jesus is saying. Some say he's a lunatic for spouting such nonsense. And there is evidence his own family, during his ministry, also thought he might be "a few cards short of a full deck". This text also shows us the difference between lunatic and liar. It's one thing to claim you are "The Good Shepherd", and insult the religious leaders as uncaring "hirelings" or "employees" ("hired holy men" like me, perhaps). These Jews were saying, "he's nuts". That's one thing. But then, Jesus goes on to lie about God (in their view), because Jesus says "I and the Father are one,"--which to their ears makes God into a mere ordinary man. In this one text we get why the Jews would charge Jesus with both with lunacy and lying. That's why they start picking up stones, again.

The Jews think he is a liar, and/or a lunatic. But was he?

Clearly, this crowd is already divided—who could do such things if he were not from God, they ask. Jesus' followers were pretty sure he was the Lord—they addressed him that way, and so did a lot of the public, even foreigners!

Looking at the gospel records, we see Jesus as a teacher from God, a miracle-worker and a healer from God—but it will only be by his death and resurrection that the disciples will get that Jesus IS who he said, “The Son of God”, the Lord. Strobel will focus on that as we get closer to Easter, but this week, we'll see what evidence Lee's scholarly guests gather up, to address these questions of “liar, lunatic, or Lord”.

C. S. Lewis' words—there are only 3 possibilities about Jesus, “Liar, Lunatic, or Lord”—are a useful tool when you're talking about how your friend might view Jesus. When you have gotten into a natural faith conversation, and you have shared your own love for God, you can ask your friend if he has decided about Jesus. “(John), who do you say that Jesus was? There are only three possibilities—Jesus was either a liar, or a lunatic, or the Lord who deserves to be obeyed. I'd love to know which you've chosen, and why.”

You could do that. Yes, you. And you may be the only person in your friend's life who will care enough to connect him or her with God, as the Holy Spirit leads. Nothing would please God more! You may have helped God accomplish God's greatest desire—to have an ongoing relationship with your friend, too.

I can tell you from personal experience, it's an awesome moment when someone comes close to God, and asks your help to make the connection. Suddenly you are present at a new birth, and you are the midwife, and this may be a sudden move you didn't expect, but you are there, and you can help, and so you do, and you rejoice in the new relationship you see born before your eyes. I never get tired of that, and I would love for you to have that awesome, humbling, rich experience, too. You will never be the same again.

Have fun exploring “our liar or lunatic or Lord” this week, and ask God to point you to someone in your world God has been wanting to reach. May you have the privilege of midwifing another into new life in Jesus.

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on February 24, 2008, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]