

Did Peter Believe Jesus Was God?

by Servetus the Evangelical

After the 1st century, almost all Christians have believed Jesus was God. But the New Testament (NT) reveals that the Apostle Peter could not have believed such a notion.

Peter is the most interesting and important character among Jesus' chosen apostles. That is why, in the synoptic gospels, he is always listed first among the twelve apostles. And it was the same with Jesus inner core: Peter, James, and John. Moreover, Jesus gave Peter the keys to the kingdom. Thus, he became the first to preach the gospel to Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles (Matthew 16.19; Acts 1.8; 2.14; 8.14; 10.34-43). What Peter said or didn't say about Jesus is critical in knowing if Jesus was God.

Once, Jesus privately asked his apostles, "who do you say that I am?" And Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16.15-16). So, Peter acknowledged that what was most important to believe about Jesus is that he was the promised Messiah of Israel, the Son of God, not that he was God.

Then Jesus told his apostles he must suffer many things at the hands of the religious authorities at Jerusalem and be killed there. We read, "Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You'" (Matthew 16.22). If Peter thought Jesus was God, he sure wouldn't have done that!

After Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, Peter became the spokesperson for the community of Jesus' disciples, what scholars call the Jesus Movement. He preached the first evangelistic sermons to large crowds at Jerusalem, convicting his Jewish brethren of their consenting to Jesus' crucifixion. These messages, recorded in the book of Acts, provide some of the most substantial evidence that Jesus cannot be God.

The first day of Pentecost Peter preached about "Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst" (Acts 2.22). Peter identifies Jesus as a man and distinguishes him from God, indicating that he did not believe Jesus was God.

Peter concludes this first sermon by proclaiming to the Jewish people, "let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2.36). Again, Peter distinguishes Christ from God, which always indicates that Christ is not God. And God making Jesus Lord and Christ shows that God was sovereign in doing it, so that Jesus is subordinate to God.

Peter also emerges as the foremost character in the NT who identifies Jesus as God's "servant" (Acts 3.13, 26; cf. 4.27, 30; 1 Peter 2.22). Church fathers quit doing it. The obvious reason is that it clashed with their notion that he was God. In contrast, the Koran well states, "The Messiah does not disdain to be a servant of God" (4:172).

Furthermore, in each of Peter's first three sermons he declares that God raised Jesus from the dead (Acts 2.24, 32; 3.15; 4.10). Later, when Peter first preached to Gentiles he proclaimed, "You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good, and healing all who were oppressed by the devil; for God was with Him.... God raised Him up on the third day" (Acts 10.38, 40). Jesus was not God because he depended upon God's empowering Spirit. Peter declaring that God was *with* Jesus obviously shows that Jesus was not God.

So, rather than assert that Jesus was God, Peter regularly distinguished the two. And he proclaimed that God raised Jesus from the dead, as if it was very important to believe. Post-apostolic church fathers so emphasized that Jesus was God that some deemphasized the importance of preaching that God raised Jesus from the dead.

Peter did not believe Jesus was God but that he had a God—the Father. He writes in the salutation of his first NT letter, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1.3). A few verses later he says of Jesus, “Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God” (v. 21). God giving Jesus glory shows that Jesus did not previously possess it, further indicating that he was not God.

Some traditionalists cite the last clause in 2 Peter 1.1 to support that Peter believed Jesus was God. Nearly all English Bibles translate it as the New American Standard Bible (NASB) does, which reads, “of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ.” One Person is in view, which calls Jesus “God.” But the King James Version (KJV) reads, “of God and our Savior Jesus Christ.” Two Persons are in view, so that Jesus is not called “God.”

This difference is due to a grammatical problem. Since *soterios* (Savior) in the Greek text is anarthrous (without the article), the question is whether the personal pronoun *hemon* (our) applies to *theou* (God), as in the NASB, or *soterios*, as in the KJV. J.N.D. Kelly says of this same issue in Titus 2.13, “‘Savior’ tended to be anarthrous (cf 1 Tim 1.1), and in any case the correct use of the article was breaking down in late Greek.”

The following internal evidence indicates that the two Persons rendering is correct: (1) if Peter authored 1 and 2 Peter, he would not call Jesus “God” in 2 Peter 1.1 and inject confusion by distinguishing them in the next verse; (2) a similar compound title, “the/our Lord and Savior (Jesus Christ),” appears four times in this letter (2 Peter 1.11; 2.20; 3.2, 18), indicating that it had become a fixed formula that does not identify Jesus as God; (3) Peter would not have written “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” in 1 Peter 1.3 and then call Christ “God” here in 2 Peter 1.1.

In sum, Peter did not believe Jesus was God but that he was the Christ, the Savior, the obedient and subordinate servant of the sovereign and only God—the Father.