

Is Jesus God Because of His Resurrection?

by Servetus the Evangelical

All four gospels of the New Testament (NT) culminate with an account of Jesus' bodily resurrection and his disciples' discovery of his empty tomb. All of these reports further relate several post-resurrection appearances of Jesus that occurred during the next forty days, when his disciples literally saw, touched, and talked to him and ate and drank with him (e.g., Matthew 28.9; Luke 24.39-43; Acts 10.40-41; cf. John 20.27; 21.15).

Despite the difficulty in harmonizing these reports in order to provide a historically-accurate composite, Jesus' resurrection was so critical to the development of Christianity. C.H. Dodd asserts, "It is the central belief about which the church itself grew, without which there would have been no church and no gospels." And William Lane Craig, an authority on Jesus' resurrection, explains, "The origin of Christianity therefore hinges on the belief of the early disciples that God had raised Jesus from the dead."

Many Christians and their best-selling authors claim Jesus' resurrection indicates he is God. Paul Little says, "Jesus' supreme credential to authenticate his claim to deity was his resurrection from the dead." Lee Strobel asserts, "The empty tomb... is the ultimate representation of Jesus' claim to being God... the supreme vindication of Jesus' divine identity." Alister McGrath insists, "The central and decisive Christian doctrine of the divinity of Jesus Christ is grounded in his resurrection from the dead." Those who say these things usually do so arbitrarily, providing no rationale or biblical support.

Most contemporary, traditionalist scholars would disagree with this extreme position. (A traditionalist is a person who believes Jesus is God.) Leading Jesus researcher N.T. Wright alleges that it is "a frequent misunderstanding" that Jesus' "resurrection somehow proves Jesus' divinity." He says of Judaism in the time of Jesus, "resurrection was what was supposed to happen to all the dead, or at least all the righteous dead, and there was no suggestion that this would simultaneously constitute divinization." He adds, "When the New Testament predicts the resurrection of all who belong to Jesus, there is no suggestion that they will thereby become, or be shown to be, divine. Clearly, therefore, resurrection by itself could not be taken to 'prove' the 'divinity' of Jesus; if it did, it would prove far too much. The over-simple apologetic strategy one sometimes encounters ('he was raised from the dead, therefore he is the second person of the Trinity') makes no sense."

The early Jewish Christians preached that Jesus' empty tomb and post-resurrection appearances verified that God had vindicated him. They further claimed this as evidence that he was the Christ, the Son of God, but not that he was God (Acts 2.31, 36; Romans 1.4). These positive maxims were the heart of their message. Wright calls this connection "the key move in early Christology." James Dunn concludes, "The belief that God raised Jesus from the dead is, if anything, of even more fundamental importance to Christian faith than the belief in Jesus as the Son of God."

Dunn makes this statement because most Christians have differed from the early Christians, as portrayed in the NT, by believing that Jesus' status as the Son of God indicates that he was God. They assert that Jesus eternally preexisted as God, being the ontological Logos-Son of God, and that he became a man. They call man becoming God "the incarnation," which literally means "enfleshment." But the NT repeatedly identifies

Jesus as the Son of God without suggesting that this status means he was God. So, Dunn means Jesus' resurrection is more important than his incarnation.

The book of Acts in the NT reveals that Jesus' apostles made his resurrection the chief cornerstone of their faith as well as their evangelistic message. They never preached that Jesus was God but that God raised Jesus from the dead (Acts 2.24, 32; 3.15, 26; 4.10; 5.30; 10.40). And despite Jesus saying in John 10.15-18 that God had given him the authority to lay down his life and take it up again, the early Christians never preached that Jesus actually raised himself from the dead. In fact, Jesus' resurrection depended upon God the Father, and this dependence further indicates that Jesus was not God. Sometimes, his apostles mentioned that they were eye-witnesses of the risen Jesus (e.g., Luke 1.2; Acts 1.8; 2.32; 3.15; 10.39-41; 1 John 1.1-3).

Subsequent church fathers generally reversed this message. They asserted that the foundation of the Christian faith is the incarnation, that God became the man Jesus, so that Jesus was and is God. They thereby made Jesus' resurrection a secondary element in their message. They reasoned that Jesus being God was most important to Christian faith and therefore not his resurrection because it merely testifies to his being God.

No NT authors ever indicate that Jesus' resurrection, ascension, or heavenly session resulted in some kind of divinization or deification of him or a reclaiming or reactivation of deity or any attributes of deity, as if to confirm the later Church dogma that Jesus was "Very God of Very God." And there is no biblical evidence suggesting that the essence of the post-Easter, heavenly Jesus is any different from that of the pre-Easter Jesus. The pre-Easter Jesus was no more than a man, and the same is true of the post-Easter, heavenly Jesus. The only difference is that the pre-Easter Jesus had a physical body that was subject to death, whereas the post-Easter Jesus has a resurrection, spiritual body that is glorified, immortal, and eternal.

In conclusion, Jesus' resurrection indicates his dependence upon God, which always affirms that he is not God. For, Jesus was not sovereign in rising from the dead. It happened because the one and only Almighty God accomplished his will through his obedient Son by means of the Holy Spirit.

