

What Are the Claims of Christ?

by Servetus the Evangelical

Many Christians, mostly Evangelicals, speak of “the claims of Christ.” They usually mean that Jesus claimed things about his identity that are recorded in the New Testament (NT). These people, called “traditionalists,” assert that the greatest claim Jesus ever made about himself was that he was God. But NT evidence reveals that this is their claim, not that of Jesus. Strong traditionalist Brian Hebblethwaite concedes, “it is no longer possible to defend the divinity of Jesus by reference to the claims of Jesus.”

Indeed, NT support for Jesus claiming to be God is extremely thin. In fact, there isn’t anything in the four NT gospels in which Jesus says expressly that he is God, such as, “I am God” or the like. And the main verse traditionalists cite is John 10.30, in which Jesus said, “I and the Father are one.” They interpret “one” to mean one in essence, so that the Father and the Son are two Persons but essentially one God.

On the contrary, Jesus meant no more than that he and the Father were united in relationship and purpose. This is confirmed in Jesus’ prayer in John 17. In it, five times he uses the word “one,” which is *hen* in the Greek NT. He asked the Father concerning his disciples, “that they may (all) be one, even/just as We are one” (vv. 11, 22, cf. 21). If Jesus meant in John 10.30 that he and the Father were essentially one, then he must have meant the same here, that he and his disciples were organically one, which is ludicrous. Besides, Jesus explained he meant “that they may be perfected in unity” (v. 23).

Jesus’ antagonists listening to him also misunderstood his word “one.” They accused him of “blasphemy; and because You, being a man, make Yourself out to be God” (John 10.33). Jesus denied their allegation by admitting that he only proclaimed, “I am the Son of God” (10.36; cf. 19.7; no article “the” in the Greek text). Jews never interpreted this title to mean “God,” but distinguished God and his Son as in Psalm 2.2, 7, 12.

Ernst Haenchen rightly explains about this error by alleging, “The Jews are therefore completely mistaken when they accuse him of blasphemy; he makes himself equal to God. He actually stands in the place of God as the one sent by him.”

Like all good Jews, Jesus was a monotheist. He proved it by citing and affirming the Shema, and it has profound relevance to his claims about his identity. Once a scribe asked him, “What commandment is the foremost of all?” Jesus answered, “The foremost is, HEAR, O ISRAEL! THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE LORD” (Mark 12.28-29; cf. Deuteronomy 6.4). The scribe said, “You have truly stated that HE IS ONE, AND THERE IS NO ONE ELSE BESIDES HIM” (v. 32). Like all Jews, the man understood “one” in the Shema numerically. Jesus did too because he accepted what the scribe said.

Traditionalists admit that most biblical support they offer for asserting that Jesus claimed to be God represents no more than implication. An example is Jesus claiming certain prerogatives which these traditionalists, and Jews in Jesus’ time, believed belong only to God, such as, the authority to raise the dead and forgive and judge sin. Yet Jesus made it clear that such prerogatives did not belong to him inherently by nature but that God had given them to him (Matthew 28.18; John 5.21-27). So, in affirming such authority Jesus indicated that he was dependent upon God. Yet classical theism, which traditionalists accept, requires that God, being self-subsistent, depends on no one.

What *did* Jesus claim about his identity? His favorite title he applied to himself was “the Son of Man,” which alludes to “One like a Son of Man” in Daniel 7.13. Contrary to some modern scholars, it does not depict a divine figure but a literal man who receives a kingdom in heaven that will consist of human beings from every language and nation (v. 14). Thus, he is the man for all peoples. Jesus integrated this figure with others in the Old Testament (OT), such as the Servant (Isaiah 42—53) and the Messiah.

Jesus did not go around broadcasting that he was the Messiah. Jews were right; that role will include overthrowing Israel’s enemies and making it the greatest nation on earth. Jesus explained that he must suffer first (Luke 24.6-7, 44-46). So, he imposed a messianic secret, commanding people and demons not to divulge that he was the Messiah, sometimes saying they could do so after his resurrection (Matthew 16.20; 17.9).

Occasionally, Jesus’ disciples told him privately that he was the Messiah, and a few times they included the title “the Son of God” (Matthew 16.16; John 1.49; 11.27). Jesus accepted both designations. Most Christians have believed that the latter indicates that Jesus was God, but nothing in the NT verifies this. Instead, Jews believed, and the OT affirms, that the Son of God referred to a very pious man greatly favored by God. This seems to be verified by the heavenly voice at Jesus’ baptism and transfiguration, which said, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3.17; 17.5).

Jesus also accepted that his disciples called him “Lord.” They only meant by it that he was their Master because they had placed themselves under his authority (John 11.28; 13.13). But some Christian scholars have asserted that Jesus being Lord indicates that he is God because the Jews substituted “Lord” (*kurios*) for God’s name, YHWH, in the Septuagint (LXX)—the 3rd century BCE Greek translation of the Jewish Bible. But it is now confirmed that such extant LXX copies were not made by Jews but Christians. Regardless, using such means of circumlocution for God’s name proves nothing.

Some Christians insist that Jesus’ “I am” sayings in the Gospel of John, especially those without a predicate, allude to Yahweh’s “I AM” saying he uttered to Moses at the burning bush incident, recorded in Exodus 3.14, and therefore represents a claim to be Yahweh. Not at all; when Jesus said “I am,” he explained he meant what he had “been saying ... from the beginning,” that he was the Son of Man (John 8.24-25, 28).

In sum, Jesus never claimed to be God; rather, he distinguished himself from God.