

# Christ Presbyterian Church

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## "Reason for Hope: Historical Jesus"

### Acts 2

Our series on apologetics is the way we're capping off the study of Luke's story about Jesus found in the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. I would like you to take out your Bibles, please, and turn to Acts, Chapter 2. The first person who finds it, would you just call out the page that it's found on in the pew Bibles. Okay, it's page 1,620 in one of the versions of our pew Bibles. We're going to start around verse 21.

While you're finding it, let me just say that last week in our first push-back from the culture, the first thing we tried to answer was, are all religions really the same? And we said, *yes and no*. Yes, we do believe that all religions are human attempts to figure out who God is and how to please that God, and in that sense they are all the same. We are all trying figure out whom God is. We are all trying to figure out how to please that God, but they are just human attempts and in that sense, one religion, whether it's Christian or Buddhist, is not better than the other. They are just human attempts. What we said, though, is that those who follow Christ believe that religion is our attempt to *get* to God, and *Jesus changes everything*. Jesus comes from outside the world, outside religion. Jesus comes into the world and says, "I'm God. Follow Me." That is what is different.

We said this week we would talk about the most frequent objection to Jesus. I think, frankly, our culture views Jesus a lot better than it views Christians. Actually, there is even a book called *They Like Jesus but Not the Church*. People *like* Jesus or at least the idea of Jesus, and yet most of our culture, if pressed, would say that they struggle, not with the idea of Jesus as a teacher or a great role model or founder of a religion, but they struggle with the idea of saying that this one Person is God. "How can you prove to me that Jesus is God?" That's what we are going to try to talk about today.

Jesus is the most famous Person in history but also the most controversial. There was a series of studies, say from 1880 to 1960, called in religious circles "the quest for the historical Jesus." Did Jesus really live? What was Jesus really like? What did He really believe? What was His mission? Hence, the quest for the historical Jesus. And, it stopped rather suddenly because they believed that Jesus had finally been found.

But how do you answer the person who resists faith because they say, "I like Jesus, but I don't believe He is God. Prove to me that He is God." Well, you might be tempted to pull out the Bible

and turn to Acts, Chapter 2, and read what the Bible says. I think that's a great idea for *you*, but I think that we need to remember that the role of Scripture for the believer is to instruct *us* and to give *us* hints about how to persuade them. It is not for us to be able to hold it up and say, "See, it says right here in the Bible..." because they don't believe in the Bible. We need to find ways to get answers from Scripture and then to find ways in Scripture that persuaded others. That's where I believe Scripture can help us.

Luke, the same guy who writes Acts, starts out his Gospel this way. He says, "Therefore, since I carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good to me to write you an orderly account of what happened so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught about." To make you certain of what you have been taught. The apostle John writes a series of letters, and in one of them, he says, "I write these things to you." In other words, the Bible is *written*, "I write these things to you, those of you who believe, so you might become convinced of what you believe." For the outsider our best hope is that the Bible would at least be seen as a reliable record of what happened and as faithful people's explanation of why it happened. Not that by itself it will convince, but if we could get people to see that we believe the Bible is a reliable record of what happened and is our explanation for why it happened, then we're using the Bible appropriately outside the family.

Are you with me on that? Do you at least understand we're not trying to beat people over the head with the Bible? We are trying to hear the Bible speak to us and have its Spirit speak to others. That's what happens, I believe, as we look at the Day of Pentecost found in Acts, Chapter 2. After this wind blows and the Spirit of Fire descends upon the apostles, when Peter gets up to speak, everybody from all different nations of the world hears Peter speak to them in their own language, just like the call to worship. All different languages but everybody understood their particular language. Peter gives a long speech and in that speech, he quotes the prophet Joel saying, "At the end days, the young and the old will have visions," and he ends the quotation from the prophet Joel in verse 21. Let's pick it up there.

"The prophet Joel said, 'And everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved.' People of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a Man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through Him, as you yourselves know. This Man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, you put Jesus to death by nailing Him to the cross. But God raised Him from the dead, freeing Him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on Jesus." Then he goes on to quote King David, another voice of prophecy.

Somebody comes up to you and says, "I believe that Jesus was a great Man. I don't believe that He was God. Do you believe that Jesus was a great Man?" Where do you start? I think you start by agreeing with them. "Yes, I believe that Jesus was a great Man." You know, it says in the Scriptural account, "Jesus of Nazareth was a Man, accredited to you by God." Jesus of Nazareth was a historical figure, a Man, a peasant Rabbi during the reign of one of the Caesars.

We cannot escape the humanity of Jesus, but we also cannot stop there. We have to say, "There's more to the story." Within months or years of Jesus' death, Jesus' followers started to say, "He was fully Human," but they were also saying things like, "What we've seen, what we've heard, what our own hands have touched," our hands have touched this Jesus, that's what we are talking to you about. The followers said that they heard Jesus say, "I and the Father are

One. The one who has seen me has seen God.” The apostle Paul said, “I saw Him. Even after He was dead, I saw Him, and I believe that even though Jesus was in very nature God, He laid aside His rights as God, suffering death on a cross.” Yes, fully Human but *more*.

Right from the beginning, that’s where Christians got in trouble. People loved the idea of Jesus the Prophet, Jesus the Rabbi, Jesus the Messiah, Jesus the One who came to be the King. They loved all that stuff, but where Christians got in trouble was saying, “He was a Man, and He was God.” For the Jews there was only one God, and they would kill anybody who said differently. The followers of Jesus got in trouble with the Roman Empire for saying not just that Jesus was God--the Romans had no problem with that--but by saying that Jesus was the *only* God. They would not bow down to all the other gods of the Roman Empire, and they would not bow down to the emperor as god. Even today Christians don’t get in trouble with Jesus, the Founder of Christianity or the Teacher. We get in trouble when we say, “Jesus was Human and God.”

As a matter of fact, how many of you have had anything like the experience of the kids today who are in a Philosophy 101 class their sophomore year in college, and their philosophy teacher comes up and says, “Today we are going to talk about absolute truth. How many of you grew up in a church where they told you that Jesus of Nazareth was God? How many of you still believe that?” And watch all these kids’ hands go up. Nobody is saying yes because they know the professor is going to tear them apart. That’s where Christianity is so distinct. How would we answer that question?

First, I think you have to know what people are objecting to. I think there are **three common arguments against the position of Jesus as God**. The first is some people deny the historicity of Christ. They deny that He was a flesh and blood figure in history. This, frankly, is a less common argument than it used to be. Very few people now will say that Jesus was a myth. Even hard-core atheists would say that the research of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, especially the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and many of the other first century documents, would give increasing evidence to the idea that very early on-- within years--there was a community of people who followed Jesus the Rabbi. Josephus the Jew talks about Jesus the Rabbi-rebel, and so there is a grudging acceptance of the idea that even if Jesus was not God, there was a Rabbi named Jesus. That one we usually don’t have to fight nearly as much. If they do say, “I think Jesus was just a myth,” you can point them to many of the atheists who would say, “No, no, Jesus was a historical figure, but He wasn’t who He thought He was.”

The second argument against Jesus is when folks accept the historicity of Jesus, but they deny the Deity of Christ. They deny that He was God. Some of them will say He never claimed to be God, that it was His followers who pressed that title on Him. Others will say, “I believe in Jesus the teacher but not that Jesus thought He was God.” Here is where my Philosophy 101 story comes in. Actually, it was Psychology 101. I had grown up, frankly, far from the Christian story, and at the end of high school, the beginning of college, I had come to a relationship with Jesus through the Young Life-Campus Life doors and was eagerly figuring out all I could about faith.

I went to a state school, and my Intro to Psychology professor was magnificent. He was a great teacher. He took a shine to me, and I wanted to be his assistant and to help him any way I could. So we were sitting there, and I’m feeding him the papers handed in for a test, and he says, “So what’s happening in your life?” Trying to be friendly I said, “Well, you know, frankly,

I've just had this religious conversion, and I've started to believe that Jesus meant what He said." And this guy says, "Oh, Jesus was a great guy, a towering figure of history like Buddha or Gandhi or Muhammad, one of the great figures of religion." And I go, "Yeah, but I think what has changed my life is this idea that He saves people." "What do you mean He saves people?" "Well, I think Jesus said, 'I forgive sins,' and who can forgive sins except God? I believe God has forgiven my sins." He replied, "Jesus never said that."

That's one of the objections, frankly, that you often get. People who haven't read the story will hear about the story and say, "Jesus didn't say He was God." Now I have known this stuff for all of about eight weeks but I said, "No, no, no, Professor. It says in John 10, 'I come that you might have life and have it in all its fullness. The one who has seen Me has seen the Father.'" He said, "My Kingdom is not of this world." He was other-worldly. He was God.

The professor said, "If Jesus really said that, He was full of blankety-blank-blank," and I was stuck. I really respected this guy. I knew this guy would win the fight. Was I willing to take one on the chops for Jesus? Or did I want an A? Jesus will forgive me. Like a lot of you, we don't know how to answer that question.

Even if I knew then what I know now, I'm not sure I would have had the courage to say, "Well, there was once a guy named C. S. Lewis who didn't believe in Jesus either. He slowly came to the idea that as you look at the story of Jesus, you can't get away from the idea that He claimed to be able to forgive sins. He claimed that even death wouldn't stop Him, and He claimed to be God. So you have to decide what to do about that." Lewis said, "There are really only three things that you can do. You can say that Jesus was a scam artist, that He was a liar, that He was doing this to give extra authority to His teaching, but He knew He was not God. But He didn't come across as a liar. Even the people who were against Him didn't think He was lying. They just thought He was wrong.

Then he said, "Well, if He wasn't a liar, then, what do you do with somebody who comes in and says, 'Hi, my name is George. I am the Son of God.'" You say, "George, I am delighted to meet you." "Would somebody get the paramedics?" And you take him to the local asylum. We have names for people like that, right? So if Jesus wasn't a liar, then He must have been a lunatic because people who claim to be God are crazy. Lewis said, "Jesus is either a liar or He is a lunatic—or He is telling the truth." And he said, "The more I study Jesus and His impact on others, the more I felt like Jesus was not crazy. If anybody was crazy, I was crazy. So if He is not a liar and He is not a lunatic, as crazy as it sounds, I have to leave room for the idea that Jesus could have *been* the Lord." It doesn't prove it, he said, but for him, "Jesus is either a liar or a lunatic or the Lord." I wish I had had the ability to say that back then. I didn't.

Some people deny that Jesus was a historical figure. Some people deny that Jesus was God. Some people deny the mission of Jesus. When Jesus came to earth, He wanted us to love each other. He wanted to talk about the Kingdom at the end of the age. He wanted to be the King of the Jews. I think, frankly, the mission of Jesus is not a problem for those who do not believe in Jesus. I think it is a problem for you, who say you *do* believe in Jesus. We'll talk about that later. So these are the three common arguments against Jesus as God: the historicity, the Deity, and the mission of Christ.

Let me give you in just a couple of minutes what I would use as the **three most common arguments for the Deity of Christ**. They are in this passage that describes what happens on Pentecost. I would not call them *proofs*. When I am talking with somebody who is far from God, somebody who doesn't believe that Jesus is God, I don't want to say to them, "Look, I can prove to you that Jesus is God" because, a) I don't think I can and, b) nobody *wins* an argument like that. What you *can* do is say, "Let me just show you what has had me thinking, what points me toward the idea that Jesus was not just another person." As the earliest followers of Jesus described what happened, they used these three pointers to Him, and these are found in our text today.

The first pointer is that ordinary teachers don't do miracles. That's the first thing to say to people who say, "He was a Man who did wonders, miracles, and signs." I believe that the miracles validate the claims that Jesus had, not that He was a great teacher. Jesus didn't do miracles so people would believe in His teaching. Jesus did miracles so that people might believe that He was more than a Man. Jesus heals people, people with withered hands, people with leprosy, even, apparently, people who have been dead. But you remember that time some friends brought in a paralyzed guy by lowering him through the roof. This paralyzed guy couldn't walk, and all the religious figures are there saying, "Do you think He will try to cure him?" "I don't think so. Who does He think He is, God?" And what was fascinating was, Jesus turned to the man who was paralyzed and said, "Your sins are forgiven." "Oh, who does He think He is, God?" It says in the story, "Jesus knew what they were thinking, and He turned to them all and said, 'Which is easier to say 'Your sins are forgiven' or 'Get up and walk'? But so that you will know that I have the authority to forgive sins, He turned to the paralyzed man and said, 'Get up and walk.'" Miracles are the signs that what Jesus claims is true.

The Gospel of John talks about the crowds that flocked to Jesus because of the miracles He did. Jesus says, "You came because of the miracles, but I did those so that you might know they have power from God. / have power from God." So if a friend of mine were to have an argument with me, I'd say, "You can claim to be God. Show me what you've got." The miracles, I think, point to His power.

The second thing that this story shows, I think, is where He says, "This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge." In other words, God didn't wake up in heaven one day and say, "Oh, where did the human beings go? Oh, no. What am I going to do now? Somebody send Jesus." From hundreds of years before, people had known that God was going to respond to our predicament by sending Someone to save us. That Savior whom they called the Messiah was not a regular human being. He was not just God's agent but was to be God's Son. That's why it says here that Peter refers back to the prophet Joel, who hundreds of years before had said, "In that day God will send His Spirit in the form of a Son." And then he talks about how King David, hundreds of years before, had talked about the One who would really sit on the throne. I would say, "I don't think that Jesus comes into history by accident. I think it is part of a plan God had from the time that He rescued the Jews out of Egypt all the way until now." I don't think God is surprised. I think we are surprised because God's plan is not what people had thought it would be.

Somebody says, "Yeah, I don't believe Jesus is God," and you say, "Well, look at the miracles." "Okay." "Well, look at all the prophecies about it." "Okay. Show me what you've got." Everything in Christianity, the Deity of God, rises and falls on one thing, and it's in this text. It says, "You

killed Him, but God raised Jesus from the dead. It was impossible for death to keep its hold on Jesus.” That’s what proves to us that Jesus was telling the truth, that He rose from the dead.

Paul says, “If Jesus did not rise from the dead, you are an idiot, and your hope is in vain. But if He did rise from the dead, all bets are off.” So when we have people who come to us and say, “We believe Jesus was a great teacher,” you say, “I’m sorry that door is closed. A good teacher does not say that they are God.” If the guy says, “Well, I don’t believe that Jesus is God,” you say, “Well, I hear you. You need to decide if you believe all these people saying that they saw a dead man walking were just making it up. I have come to believe that Jesus died and rose from the dead. Ordinary people don’t do that. That’s why I follow Jesus.” Miracles, prophecies, resurrection.

Let me close with this. I said that *the church denies the mission of Jesus*. The world denies the historicity and the Deity of Jesus. I think the church denies the mission of Jesus. There was an old saying in the last century that said, “God made man in His own image and ever since, men have returned the favor.” In other words, God made us. We said, “Well, supersize me, and this is what God looks like.” We made God look like us, and I think that’s what, I don’t want to say *you* do, I think that is what *we* do. Many of us see Jesus in our own image where Jesus looks a lot like what our particular political philosophy looks like.

It’s amazing how many people think Jesus is a Republican. It’s amazing how many people think Jesus is a Democrat. Many see Jesus as the revolutionary or the teacher or the healer or the friend or the one who is “gentle Jesus meek and mild.” Isn’t it amazing how often Norwegians think that Jesus had blond hair. Long blond hair. Isn’t it amazing how many people born in The Congo think Jesus looked black as they were? You know where that leads? That leads to taking God and making Him look like your agenda, “And so a God without wrath brought a people without sin into a Kingdom without a cross.” I believe that the religious right has reduced Jesus to a bumper sticker, and that bumper sticker says, “Jesus died for your sins.” I don’t think that’s the story. I think the religious left has turned Jesus into a bumper sticker that says, “Jesus died for justice,” and the latest political ideology of the day is what Jesus is for, and I think that shrinks Jesus, too. I believe we have to take the full story of Jesus and follow *that* God.

You know why people won’t believe that Jesus is God? Because they don’t see us *living like that*. People won’t believe it if we don’t live it. When we don’t let Jesus speak for Himself, when we don’t let Jesus speak to us, then we lose out on the biggest proof of Christianity. The biggest proof of Christianity happens on Pentecost, when people had chickened out about Jesus and deserted him and ran as far away as they could. Fifty days later, they are standing up and saying, “I’m a Jesus-man, and I’ll die for Him. Jesus came back from the dead. I’m following Him wherever He goes.” Has Jesus changed your life? Not your mind but your life? Are you putting all of your chips on the Jesus square? Those who followed Jesus turned the world upside down because they no longer feared to die, and now they knew how to live.

I talked at the beginning about the quest for the historical Jesus. It ended really with one book being published. Now I’ve got to tell you that the book was 1,153 pages long. That may have been why it ended the story, but it also ended the story because it was by a guy named Albert Schweitzer. Remember studying in history about Albert Schweitzer, the Ph.D. who was also a medical doctor, who was also a concert-level organist, who gives all that up and goes to Africa to serve the poor? He writes a book called *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, and it finishes the story about Jesus.

This is how Schweitzer ends the book, “Jesus comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those who knew Him not. Jesus speaks to us the same word: ‘Follow Me!’ and sets us to the tasks He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they are wise or simple, Jesus will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and as a mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.” You don’t know Who Jesus is by passing a test. You learn Who Jesus is by following Him. We follow Him here to this table, and we hear Him saying, “Here I am. Here I am.” Let’s pray.

Lord Jesus, I thank You that this isn’t about the head alone or the heart or the feet, but it’s about all of us coming to believe that You are God and You are alive. Take this bread, take this juice, and let it represent for us the power of the living God, whose Body is broken and whose Blood is spilled so that we might believe that death cannot hold God who comes to save us and lead us through life. Lots of us have doubts. Many of us have questions. I ask You to use this meal to help us join You on the journey through life where we will see You as our Savior and our God. In Your Name. Amen.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*