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## Lord, Liar, Lunatic . . . or Just *Freaking* Awesome

I have discovered a secret way of solving the most perplexing theological questions. My college roommate and I invented it in our dorm room as a way of finding answers to some of our most contentious debates. We were religion and philosophy majors, which means we argued about religion and politics as a kind of recreational sport. When we arrived at an intractable difference of opinions, we settled it like any nineteen-year-old scholar should—by playing a video game. We settled our disputes over a game of Madden 2001, to be exact. We decided that the best way for the Holy Spirit to lead us to a solution to our dilemma was through a simulated NFL game. It's the postmodern version of casting lots! Will God save every human who has ever lived? Yes. Is there anything more annoying than a libertarian Calvinist with a goatee? No.

Would Jesus invade Iraq? No. Was Stryper or Guns N' Roses the greatest hair-metal band? GNR, but I am still protesting that decision.

Perhaps the most memorable game settled a question about Jesus you never even thought to ask: *Did Jesus have nocturnal emissions?* The answer was yes.

The full humanity of Jesus is something every Christian affirms, but when it comes to discussing his journey through adolescence, we like to keep it vague—"He grew in wisdom and in stature" is the only mention in the Bible of his teen years. Of course, we don't spend much time thinking about Jesus having lice in his hair or pooping, even if he did such things in the holiest of ways. Somehow this real-deal human being has been redacted from our theology. What's left is less a story about a homeless first-century Jew and prophet of God's kingdom than a theological conclusion: Jesus is God.

Even worse, many Christians believe this conclusion is patently obvious. They assume that Jesus overtly claimed that he was God, that it's recorded all through the Bible, and that if you don't affirm this truth, you may be in eternal jeopardy. This precarious conclusion is often put forward in the form of a trilemma popularized by C. S. Lewis: Jesus claimed to be the Lord, so Jesus is either the Lord, or else he's a liar or a lunatic. Giving the hearer two answers that lead to damnation is not exactly opening up the dilemma.

As a pretty big fan of Jesus, let me just say that the trilemma is ridiculous. I call Jesus my Lord and Savior, but the demand that each of us respond to Jesus in such a reductive way is dumbfounding. In fact, it only takes five minutes with a biblical scholar to realize how preposterous

the idea is. The historical Jesus didn't claim to be God, biblical scholars will tell you, but his followers saw him as divine when God raised him from the dead. (For this reason, some add "legend" as a fourth alliterative option in the trilemma, proposing that Jesus' followers exaggerated it.) What exactly that event means for us today is an open question with a bunch of plausible answers. As you read this book I hope you will not only think through the questions you bring and the answers you muster, but also come to appreciate those of others who follow Jesus.

Just the idea of writing a "guide to Jesus" is presumptuous. I'm pretty sure that two billion Christians are not sitting around waiting for some dude with a podcast to

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If a twenty-first-century  
discussion of Jesus starts  
out with wet dreams,  
then I'll stick with  
Science Digest.

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THE ACOLYTE

finally guide them to an image of Jesus worth their allegiance. Nor is writing such a guide easy. If a guide to the economy, the ecosystem, your own family, or even the Lego version of the Millennium Falcon is complex, why should Jesus be simple? (Hint: he isn't.)

I hope this book gets you beyond the limits of Lewis's saying and lets you see Jesus as just freaking awesome. ("Lord, Liar, Lunatic . . . or Freaking Awesome" was supposed to be the subtitle of this book, but the publisher

dropped “Freaking.” While I understand the decision, I want to say something about that. “Freaking” is a title that confers on Jesus an *overwhelming level of awesomeness*. Not “awesome” as applied to a good movie, the perfect date, or a Counting Crows concert. *Freaking awesome* is ontologically distinct and prior to anything that is simply awesome. To say that Jesus is *freaking awesome* is to say that the person of Jesus participates in the awe-someness that initiates and sustains all of creation. Likewise, when we encounter this awesomeness in Jesus, it can freak us out because realizing that we are completely known is freaky, and to receive this identity as God’s beloved through a homeless first-century Jew is *just freaking awesome*.)



THE ELDER

How can Jesus be  
homeless when he’s  
taken up residence in  
my heart?

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## Christology Is Crazy

When Christians try to answer the question “Who is Jesus?” they are engaging in what theologians call *Christology*. True, it’s not nearly as cool a name as the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, *pneumatology*, or the End Times, *eschatology*, but what Christology lacks in a sweet-sounding label, it makes up for in sheer bravado. Christology is just plain crazy. It is ridiculous. Most any spiritual person could have a conversation about the Spirit, and half of the

movies coming out of Hollywood are about some dystopian apocalyptic future, but when Christians start talking Christology, people get nervous. That's because Jesus was a homeless, itinerant, first-century rabbi who talked about the end of the world, taught in parables even his disciples couldn't follow, and ended up dying on a Roman cross as a failed political resistor. *That* is the Jesus we call the Christ, the Son of the living God, the First Born of all creation, the Image of the invisible God, the eternal Logos, and all of the other christological titles packed into the New Testament.

While the titles easily roll off our tongues in worship and are around every corner in the Bible, how to apply them is not immediately obvious. Personally, I love them, sing them, and proclaim them, but I think we would be doing ourselves and Jesus' PR firm a favor if the church were a little more aware of how we sound to outsiders. For many who grew up in the church, even those who no longer attend regularly, identifying Jesus as the Son of God is completely reasonable. We may roll our eyes whenever the latest New Atheist prophet or biblical scholar gets on TV mouthing off all sorts of reasons to doubt these names and claims, but when Tom Cruise explains the veracity of L. Ron Hubbard's science fiction we roll them for a different reason. It's absurd.

Yes, that was a Scientology joke. But if you simply switch their religious myth with ours, you get the point. Christology is packed full of strong, absurd, and tenuous affirmations about Jesus. What we say about Jesus and even how we celebrate God's work in him is shocking when looked at from the outside, and it always has been.

Pliny the Younger is not simply the name of Russian River's legendary Triple IPA, available for two wonderful

weeks in February. Pliny was also the governor of Pontus, province of Asia Minor, from 111 to 113 CE. One of the few times Jesus and the early church is mentioned by someone not part of a Christian community is in the correspondence between Pliny and the Roman emperor Trajan. Below is a wonderfully revealing piece describing how the first Christians sounded to outsiders. For context, Pliny is checking in with Trajan about his legal process for people brought before him on charges of being Christian. This means that they likely refused to worship the Roman gods, which was a serious political offense.

They asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food—but ordinary and innocent food. Even this, they affirmed, they had ceased to do after my edict by which, in accordance with your instructions, I had forbidden political associations. Accordingly, I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses. But I discovered nothing else but depraved, excessive superstition.<sup>1</sup>

Pliny nails it. These Christians are straight-up weird, singing songs to the cross-dead Jesus as if to a god, sharing

normal meals of bread and wine, promising to be ethically rigorous and trustworthy, and even ordaining female slaves as deaconesses! The only thing immediately obvious

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A beautiful display of historic Christianity! Sounds just like my diocese (except for the slave part).

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THE BISHOP

to Pliny about these Christians was that their central affirmations and practices are odd. He doesn't want to destroy the Christians, he just wants them to keep it weird on the down-low and avoid messing with Caesar's kingdom.

Today things have changed. The empire that Pliny represented eventually merged with the cross-bearer's fan club, and the reign of Christendom meant that the church's affirmations of Jesus became culturally normative. The affirmations that "Jesus is the Christ" and "Jesus is Lord" became unavoidable in the West, and this has been the case for so long that most of us Christians are just now coming to terms with how weird we sound when we talk about Jesus. It can be embarrassing. Of course, we could just stay in our Christian circles or dodge the topic when in mixed company, but if we treat the question of Jesus' identity with the seriousness his disciples always have, it's hard to imagine we can really leave it unexamined.

Therefore, I want to suggest a theological rule: *Keep it weird.*

If your Christology isn't weird, you're doing it wrong. The church's theological confessions about Christ are not suddenly embarrassing; they always have been. Join the parade! It's not like it takes a pluralistic culture informed by science to realize that identifying a dead homeless Jew as the Son of the living God is absurd. It is. Let's own it. But instead of just regurgitating it without reflection and throwing it at our befuddled neighbors as a trilemma with eternal consequences, let's let the weirdness seep into our own imaginations.

## Keeping Christology Weird

“Without risk, no faith. Faith is the contradiction between the infinite passion of inwardness and the objective uncertainty. If I comprehend God objectively, I do not have faith; but because I cannot do this, I must have faith.”<sup>2</sup> Søren Kierkegaard said that. He was a nineteenth-century Danish philosopher obsessed with the absurdity of the incarnation—that is, the doctrine of Jesus' birth.

Søren had significant doubts himself, so he explored the paradox of the God-man. In his day there was a debate between a theologian named Jacobi and a doubting philosopher named Lessing. Lessing insisted that he wanted to believe in Christ, but because of his doubts, he could not muster the courage to make the jump. For Lessing, the problem with the claim that Jesus was God was that those trying to prove it could only point to historical proof. He thought that pointing only to texts—whether sacred or historical—could not settle a question this big. To demonstrate the presence of the eternal in a particular historical



event was something Lessing couldn't manage, but that didn't stop Jacobi from trying!

Kierkegaard's response to their debate was surprising in that he chided Jacobi and not Lessing. In Lessing, Kierkegaard saw someone who was actually taking the

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I used to think there was evidence that demanded a verdict, too. Then I decided to use my brain.

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THE ELDER

christological claim with utter seriousness. Lessing recognized that faith requires—indeed, demands—a decision, a leap. Historically, there can be no security in affirming that God was indeed *in* Christ. The results are always going to be approximate and could never justify an infinite concern. Basically, Kierkegaard was saying that even if historians could make demonstrable claims about who Jesus was, that wouldn't create the conditions for genuine faith. Since the case can't be persuasive, Christ's authoritative call to faith is offensive.

For Kierkegaard, faith is not merely explaining the idea that Jesus is God so that it becomes reasonable or palatable; faith is facing the possibility of the offense and choosing to believe rather than be offended. As Kierkegaard loved to point out, it was Jesus himself who said, "Blessed are those who are not offended by me." This act of faith is the decision of the individual alone—no professor, preacher, or Sunday School teacher can make it for you.

Kierkegaard said that despite God's best efforts, there were some amazing Christian theologians who had managed to make believing way too easy. He was being sarcastic. So easy did they make the faith that there was no need for real faith. In turning the leap of faith into an easy act of intellectual assent, these theologians actually undid the conditions necessary for the possibility of faith. They turned faith from an encounter with *someone* to an idea about *something*. But Kierkegaard objected, saying that faith by its nature needed to be directed at a *subject*, not an *object*.

I'm with ol' Søren on this. Christian faith is not about learning how to crack God's true/false test, but about coming to know yourself before God. In order to preserve faith, Kierkegaard set out to make belief more difficult. In doing so, he was actually making genuine faith possible. For Søren, Christianity was not a doctrine, but a decision. And truth was not a set of propositions, but a mode of being in the world.

For me, Kierkegaard haunts all my attempts to rationalize and wrestle with God, and especially with God's presence in Christ. On my most confident days, when my convictions seem to be well constructed and viable, good ol' Søren is giggling in the corner at the entire intellectual exercise.<sup>3</sup> It's crucial for contemporary Christians to grapple with Kierkegaard's logic here because only when we become acquainted with the absurdity of christological claims can we truly affirm our faith.

In his book *Philosophical Investigations*, Kierkegaard wrote that there were really two different types of teachers. One is like Socrates, the great Greek philosopher, and the other is like Jesus. Socrates saw that truth was present

in his students, but they needed the coaxing and prodding of a skilled teacher's questions to send them on the path to discover it more fully. My old geometry teacher, Mr. Robinson, was an excellent teacher, but he himself was not necessary for the truth I discovered in his class. There are plenty of awesome geometry teachers who have been the occasion for their students' learning, but what is gained is always the *teaching* and not the *teacher*. Once you get the theorem, you can know its truth in the same way that the teacher does.

To understand Socrates is to realize you owe him nothing, but to know Jesus as the Christ is to owe him everything. For Kierkegaard, the major contrast between the two is this: for the follower of Jesus, the occasion, condition, and content of faith is inextricably connected to the teacher himself. In fact, the object of faith is not the teaching at all but the teacher—the one in whom the infinite God was present. You do not come to know the truth; you

I don't know what that means, but I hope to be known by what that means. Fancy.



THE DEACON

come to be known by the truth. As long as the Christian is defined as one for whom God was in Christ, what you gain through faith doesn't make you indistinguishable from Christ. Instead, you become known by Christ—the very teacher himself.