

Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?

A lot of people today are looking for Jesus. They just don't have any idea which one. Some are looking for the historical Jesus. Some are looking for the transcendental Jesus. Some tell us about the New Age Jesus. The Jews tell us Jesus was just a good teacher. The Muslims tell us He was a great prophet. The Mormons tell us He was an angel. The Jehovah's Witnesses explain that He was one of many lesser gods. The Hindus and Buddhists suggest He is a possible way to God, but not for everyone. With all of this swirling around us, we might get confused. Where do we find the real Jesus?

Enter Paul's confession of Christ in **Colossians 1:15-20**. Here is the real Jesus. Some critics have been saying that the language and structure of these verses are so foreign to anything else Paul wrote, we can be reasonably certain he didn't actually write these verses. Rather, he quoted them, probably with some of his own additions and adaptations. When we hear this, we might have a tendency to get all up in arms and fight against it. But stop for a moment and think about what this claim says.

The claim that Paul was just adapting a well-known hymn, confession, or creed that had been in circulation for some time is actually pretty profound. This claim does not mean the letter to the Colossians was not inspired. Inspired simply means God got what He wanted in the book. He can do that in many ways: revelation, investigation, common-knowledge, personal experience. God didn't have to directly and miraculously reveal something to consider it inspired by Him. I have no doubt God wanted this in the book.

What is far more important is to consider the implication of saying this was an already well-known confession about Jesus among the Christians. First, it means Paul didn't make up this picture of Jesus. A modern day attack on Jesus is that He was just a normal man who taught well and then Paul came along and turned Him into the Son of God, the Christ, the Messiah. But if this confession was well known before Paul wrote this letter, Paul didn't turn Jesus into the Christ; the Christians already believed it.

Second, it means this picture of Jesus didn't develop over long years. Jesus died in the early 30s AD. Colossians was written in the early 50s AD. It is stretching the imagination to believe a man can turn into a god through a groundswell movement of followers in just 20 years. But this section in Colossians makes this even less likely. If this confession was so well-known just 20 years later that Paul could use it in this way, then Christians had already been believing it for years. In other words, it didn't even take 20 years to hear this taught about Jesus.

Think about this from the liberal critics' point of view. They would have us believe Jesus was just a good man, a good teacher. He said some nice things, but He wasn't God. He wasn't the Christ. He died, but He wasn't resurrected. They would also have us believe all of His earliest followers agreed with them. They would then have us believe some upstarts hijacked the memory of Jesus, turning Him into something He never declared Himself to be and His earliest followers knew was completely false. Then we are supposed to believe the upstarts had such success that in less than two decades their new view became the orthodox view such that the original view was finally considered heresy. This is simply ridiculous.

The long and short of it is this. In **Colossians 1:15-20**, we see the picture of the real Jesus. We see the picture that Paul believed, that the early Christians believed even before Paul, that we are supposed to believe. Now it may be that Paul was wrong, that the early Christians were wrong, that we are wrong. But let's not say the very foolish thing that this idea developed over many years as the Christians who actually knew Jesus died off and that we have been duped by a legend created by an upstart man named Paul trying to get a following. This was the view of Jesus' followers from the very beginning.

Further, understand that this means if we want to be what those early Christians were, this is what we'll believe about Jesus. This is the real Jesus. Let's learn this, know this, quote this. When someone asks us what we believe about Jesus, let's say this:

"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross" (Colossians 1:15-20, ESV).

--Edwin L. Crozier