

# ΑΩ

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*I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. (Revelation 22:13)*

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## God, The First and the Last

God is always first, and God will surely be last.

To say this is not to draw God downward into the stream of time and involve Him in the flux and flow of the world. He stands above His own creation and outside of time; but for the convenience of His creatures, who are children of time, He makes free use of time-words when referring to Himself. So He says that He is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, the first and the last.

Man in the plan of God has been granted considerable say; but never is he permitted to utter the first word nor the last. That is the prerogative of the Deity, and one which He will never surrender to His creatures.

Man has no say about the time or the place of his birth; God determines that without consulting the man himself. One day the little man finds himself in consciousness and accepts the fact that he is. There his volitional life begins. *Before* that he had nothing to say about anything. *After* that he struts and boasts and utters his defiant proclamations of individual freedom, and encouraged by the sound of his own voice he may declare his independence of god and call himself an “atheist” or an “agnostic.” Have your fun, little man; you are only chattering in the interim between *first* and *last*; you had no voice at the first and you will have none at the last. God reserves the right to take up at the last where He began at the first, and you are in the hands of God whether you will or not.

This knowledge should humble us and encourage us, too. It should humble us when we remember how frail we are, how utterly dependent upon God; and it should encourage us to know that when everything else has passed we may still have God no less surely than before.

Adam became a living soul, but that becoming was not of his own volition. It was God who willed it and who executed His will in making Adam a living man. God was there first. And when Adam sinned and wrecked his whole life God was there still. Adam did not know it perhaps, but his whole future peace lay in this – that God was there *after* he had sinned. The God who was there at Adam’s beginning remained there at his ending. God was there last.

It would be great wisdom for us to begin to live in the light of this wonderful and terrible truth: God is the first and the last. The remembrance of this could save nations from many tragic and bloody decisions. Were notes written by statesmen against the background of such knowledge they might be less inflammatory, less arrogant; and were kings and dictators to think soberly of this great truth they might walk more softly and speak less like gods. For after all they are not really important and the sphere of their freedom is constricted more than they dream.

Shelley tells of the traveler who saw in the desert two vast and trunkless legs of stone, and near them half-buried in the sand lay a shattered face with a “wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command.” On the pedestal where once the proud image had stood were engraven these words: “My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair.” And, says the poet, “Nothing else remains. Round the decay of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare the lone and level sands stretch far away.”

Shelley was right except for one thing; something else *did* remain. It was God. He had been there first to look in gentle pity upon the mad king who could boast so shamelessly in the shadow of the tomb; and He was there when the winds of heaven blew down the statue and by the swirling sands covered with a mantle of pity the evidence of human decay. God was there last.

A.W. Tozer

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## Who Is Jesus?

by Charles Leiter

A little less than two thousand years ago, “when they came into the district of Caesarea Philippi,” a Jew named Jesus confronted His little band of followers with a question that even now rings through the ages and neatly divides all mankind into two groups, according to the answer they return. ‘*Who do you say that I am?*’ (Matthew 16:15)

This was not the first or only time that the question of Jesus’ identity arose during his thirty-three years among men. His unique person and works were sufficient of themselves to force it to the surface. When He said to a bedridden paralytic, “Man, your sins are forgiven you,” the religious leaders “began to reason, saying, ‘*Who is this man* who speaks blasphemies?’ “ (Luke 5:20-21) After His spoken word had calmed a stormy sea, the disciples were overwhelmed; “they became very much afraid and said to one another, ‘*Who then is this*, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?’ “ (Mark 4:39-41) Herod, upon hearing reports of Jesus, “was greatly perplexed” and exclaimed, “I myself had John beheaded, but *who is this* man about whom I hear such things?” (Luke 9:7-9) The people of His own home town were “astonished” and “offended” by His words and works. “*Is not this the carpenter?*” (Mark 6:13) Near the end of His three-year ministry, after He had ridden triumphantly into Jerusalem over the garments and palm branches spread for Him by the multitude, “all the city was stirred, saying, ‘*Who is this?*’ “ (Matthew 21:10) And only hours before His crucifixion, as he stood before the Jewish Supreme Court, the high priest sought charges against Him by asking, “*Are you the Christ*, the Son of the Blessed One?” (Mark 14:60-62)

Today, the issue of Jesus’ true identity is not one whit less pressing and important than it was two thousand years ago. Life in its richest fullness and death in its darkest despair are bound up in the answer we give to the question, “Who is Jesus?” Yet, in our post-Christian West, general ignorance of Jesus is amazing. In total disregard of abundant historical data, Jesus is fancied as being someone totally other than He is. College students, particularly, like to create a “Jesus” of their own imaginations, accepting with almost gleeful gullibility their professors’ most distorted and naïve comments against the Bible. As Clark Pinnock has well said, “Once we open the gospels and encounter Jesus, we are impressed at the enormous difference between the popular concept of

Christ and the figure actually portrayed on their pages. Whereas the Christ of modern mythology is a mild-mannered humanist, standing for vague ideals and turning the other cheek to his enemies, the Christ of the New Testament is an intrepid egoist. In every gospel, in almost every chapter, He is found making amazing claims for Himself, which are most shocking if they are not true.”

This article (and projected future articles) will seek to explore some of these “shocking” claims Jesus made for Himself, and to demonstrate that He is indeed a vastly different person than the “Christ” of popular misconception.

## Childhood

But where to begin? From the very first Jesus was different from other men. Already at the age of twelve, He is found in the temple “sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking questions.” Yet, as historian Philip Schaff has observed, He does not repel them by “immodesty and premature wisdom”; rather, they are “amazed at His understanding and His answers.” When His father and mother at last find Him there, He puzzles them with the question, “Did you not know that I had to be in My Father’s affairs?” Already He is aware of a unique relation to God. “My Father,” He says, with unassuming simplicity. “And they did not understand the statement which He had made to them.” (Luke 2:46-50)

We are told that during the years following this incident in the temple, Jesus “continued in subjection” to His parents and “kept increasing in favor with God and men,” but other than this, little is known of His life until His baptism by John in the Jordan. After He had thus begun His public ministry at the age of thirty, the unparalleled nature of Jesus’ claims began to become apparent.

## Scripture

For example, He is found some months later in His home town announcing to the assembled synagogue that the words He is reading to them from the ancient prophecy of Isaiah have found their fulfillment in Him! (Luke 4:16-22) And so it was throughout His public life. Again and again He claimed both implicitly and explicitly that the whole of the Jewish sacred writings spoke of Him. “Moses wrote of me,” He said, though Moses had written almost fifteen centuries before His birth! (John 5:45-47) Even the particular circumstances of His death He claimed to be fulfillments of divine prophecy. He tells His disciples beforehand that they will forsake Him (Matthew 26:31), Judas betray Him (John 13:18-19, 17:12; Matthew 26:24), and the religious-political hierarchy crucify Him (Mark 8:31-32; Matthew 26:52-56), “that the Scriptures may be fulfilled.” After His resurrection, He explains to the unbelieving disciples that it “was necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory.” “These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are *written about Me* in the *Law of Moses and the Prophets* and the *Psalms* must be fulfilled.” (Luke 24:25-27, 44-47).

## Kingdom of God

Jesus not only claimed to be the supreme object of the sacred Jewish writings, but also the One whose coming ushered in a new epoch and inaugurated “the preaching of the kingdom of God.” “The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the gospel,” He announced openly in the Jewish synagogues. (Mark 1:15) As time went on, He made it more and more plain that he regarded Himself as occupying a place of absolute pre-eminence in this kingdom of God, but as *His* kingdom. (Matthew 13:41, 16:28) He claims to possess the “keys” of the kingdom (Mat-

thew 16:19) and privately unfolds to His disciples the “mysteries of the kingdom” –mysteries that “prophets and wise men” had for centuries desired to hear. (Matthew 13:10-11, 16-17)

Most startling of all, he speaks of Himself as the King of this kingdom! (Matthew 25:31-34) Calmly, deliberately, unaffectedly, and with complete authority He tells us that He will come in great glory at the end of the world to establish the kingdom, that “all the nations will be gathered before Him,” and that *He* will determine the destinies of all men!

## Sins

But there is more. Before His second year of public ministry was over, Jesus had also offended the religious leaders by claiming the power to *forgive sins!* Drawing out the implications of this claim, C. S. Lewis comments, “We can all understand how a man forgives offenses against himself. You tread on my toe and I forgive you, you steal my money and I forgive you. But what should we make of a man, himself unrobbed and untrodden on, who announced that he forgave you for treading on other men’s toes and stealing other men’s money?... Yet this is what Jesus did. He told people that their sins were forgiven, and never waited to consult all the other people whom their sins had undoubtedly injured. He unhesitatingly behaved as if He was the party chiefly concerned, the person chiefly offended in all offences.” The scribes and Pharisees were quick to sense something of the implications of such actions. “He is blaspheming; who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mark 2:7) And so it is. Who *can* forgive sins, but *God alone!*

## Teachings

In perfect harmony with His claims to forgive sins, Jesus also claimed absolute authority for His teachings. When the former prophets had prefaced their statements with “Thus says the Lord”, they had admitted that theirs was only a derived authority. But Jesus claimed direct authority, not derived authority. “Thus says the Lord” was replaced in His teaching by “Truly, truly, *I* say to you.” To quote John Stott, “He never hesitated or apologized. He had no need to contradict, withdraw or modify anything He said...He predicted the future with complete conviction...He warned His hearers that their destiny depended on their response to His word...(Matthew 7:24-27; John 12:48).” His very words, he said, came from the Father and would continue to be absolutely trustworthy until the end of time. “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words shall not pass away.” “I did not speak on My own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me commandment, what to say, and what to speak.” (Matthew 24:35; John 12:49)

Some of the impact of Jesus’ “words” upon those who heard Him is seen in the comments that were made again and again about His teaching. “Where did this man get these things, and what is this wisdom given to Him?...Is not this the carpenter?” (Mark 6:2-3) “They were amazed at His teachings; for His word was with authority.” (Luke 4:32) “How has this man become learned having never been educated?” (John 7:15) And again, after His incomparable “sermon on the mount,” it is recorded, “When Jesus had finished these words, the multitudes were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.” (Matthew 7:28-29) In the words of the empty-handed officers who had been sent by the Pharisees to apprehend Him, “Never did a man speak the way this man speaks.” (John 7:46)

Who then is Jesus? Only a few of His claims have been explored above, and these very briefly, yet already it should be clear that truly “never *did* a man speak as this man spoke.” Also, it should be noted that it is primarily only Jesus’ claims *for Himself* that have been examined, not the claims

which others made for Him. What are we to make of this Man, who says such things about Himself? For some of us, the answer is already clear.

*What shall I do with Jesus?  
Neutral I cannot be.  
Someday I shall be asking,  
“What will he do with me?”*

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## **Pseudo-Christianity**

by Charles Leiter

Words are slippery customers and often mean different things to different people. For example, the word “love” has come in our day to represent everything from the feeling called forth by a tasty new dessert topping to the most careless and indifferent act of sexual gratification. When words are used loosely like this and take on new and different meanings, a problem soon arises. Unless such words are clearly defined by their users, their meaning in any given conversation is uncertain. Thus, the more meanings a word has, the less it actually means; a word that means everything actually means nothing.

To illustrate this simple but far-reaching principle, let us borrow an argument from philosopher Gordon Clark and suppose that the word “mountain” means literally everything. It means “dog”; it also means “cat”. It also means “flagpole”. “Mountain mountain mountain,” could be the next sentence! Unfortunately, such a sentence might mean, “It is raining,” or it might mean, “Thursday is Thanksgiving.” Thus, it would, in fact, mean nothing.

This is perhaps an extreme example, but the point should be clear. For a word to *mean anything*, for it to carry any content, there must be some things that the word *does not mean*.

Let us apply this principle, then, to the word “Christianity”. The mere mention of the word is often sufficient to conjure up in the hearer’s mind images of stained-glass windows, a pale pathetic “Jesus” hanging lifeless on a cross, an enormous dust-covered “family Bible”, or a towering “church steeple”. But is this Christianity? As some people would define the term, it may be; but if by the word Christianity we mean that Way of faith and practice that is taught in the Bible, then it certainly is not.

Our burden in this article is just to let you, who read this little paper from time to time, know that when we use the term “Christianity”, we *may* not be speaking about what you think! *We* use the term in reference to that new life of Truth and Spirit that was taught by the Founder of Christianity; and the teachings of Jesus are often exactly the opposite of what is called Christian today.

Granted that we are using the word in this sense, what then is Christianity? We can learn some things just by examining what it is *not*.

### **Worship**

“The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands.” (Acts 17:24)

When a woman asked Jesus whether it was Jerusalem or Mt. Gerizim to which men should go

to worship God, He told her that it was neither. “Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall you worship the Father... God is spirit; and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” (John 4:21-24) The early Christians knew that God didn’t live in special buildings. In fact, they even met in private homes to worship God. (I Corinthians 6:19, Colossians 4:15) So, right away we should know that stained-glass windows, steeples, “sanctuaries”, “alters”, and “choir lofts” should not come into our minds when we hear the word “Christian”. Neither should plastic crucifixes or “pictures of Jesus”. The early church had a living and invisible Christ within their hearts, not a dead and visible and imaginary one hanging on their walls. “We ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man,” said Paul in a somewhat different context, but not without at least some application to the point in hand. Even Bob Dylan could see that “flesh-colored Christs that glow in the dark” go to show that “not much is really sacred.” In contrast to these externals, Jesus taught that the worship of God was internal — “in spirit”, and “in truth”.

## **Prayer**

“When you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition, as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need, before you ask Him.” (Matthew 6:7)

These words of Jesus have been contradicted countless times by those who profess His name. The rhyming “prayers” that parents teach their children to rattle off mechanically before bedtime and the memorized or semi-memorized “table graces” used by adults themselves drive the number into the millions! How different and wonderful is the prayer that Jesus taught, the prayer of truly personal communion with a truly personal God.

## **Hypocrisy**

“Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like white-washed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. Even so you too outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.” (Matthew 23:27-28)

Jesus came down very hard on hypocrisy of every kind, especially when it appeared in religious leaders. His words to those who “devoured widows’ houses, even while for pretense they made long prayers” still apply to the Elmer Gantrys of today who exhort ladies to “trust God and give their last dollar to Jesus” while they themselves drive Lincoln Continentals. Likewise, His words against hypocrisy would surely still apply to those who say that the rapture is “certain to occur within the next year” and at the same time have paid-up life insurance policies! (And, to digress a little, his words against teachers should make us at least a little skeptical of those “Bible scholars” who have confidently and wrongly identified everyone from Mussolini to Kissinger as the antichrist!)

“Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel about on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make Him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.” (Matthew 23:15) These words of Jesus should serve to warn us that even zealous “missionary activities” (“travel about on sea”) and “bus ministries” (“travel about on land”) under the banner of His name may not necessarily have anything to do with Christianity. The same is true of zealous “soul-winning” (to make one proselyte”). Under the section on “how to press for

the decision,” one manual on soul winning “made easy” instructs us: “Lay your hand firmly on the subject’s shoulder (or arm), and with a semi-commanding tone of voice, say to him: ‘Bow your head with me.’ ... Bowing your head first, causes terrific psychological pressure.” No matter how much sincerity and good intent lie behind such tactics, the practice of psychologically badgering, buttonholing, and bullying people into “making a decision for Christ” bears no resemblance to the inexpressibly precious workings of the Holy Spirit. Unbelievers have long maintained that Christian conversion is nothing more than Pavlov’s dogs revisited, and pressure-packed emotional appeals to “come forward” in mass meetings often lend credence to such accusations. Far too many of these “conversions” are indeed no more than applied psychology, worlds apart from the wondrous miracle with which the living God touches man and makes him entirely new.

Jesus’ words against hypocrisy were not directed only to the religious leaders, however. Often He warned the multitudes against self-deception. “Why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” “Not every one who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father.” “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven,” He told His hearers, and went on to explain that their righteousness must extend even to the inner motives of the heart. Only the “pure in heart” would see God, according to Jesus. (Luke 6:46; Matthew 7:21; Matthew 5:20f; Matthew 5:8)

No understanding of the Bible that allows men to live as rottenly as they please, as long as they have “accepted Jesus”, deserves the name Christian. Even those of you who claim not to believe in God know that His character can’t be as mushy as that! We don’t blame you for turning away from those who practice morality only on Sunday, use religious jargon to get votes, or smoke one nervous cigarette after another despite their professed “peace in Christ”.

## Wealth

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth.” (Matthew 6:19)

Jesus often warned His would-be followers that they must choose between God and money, between selfish hoarding and joyful sharing. “No one can serve two masters,” He told them, in a context that caused the words to have eternal implications for each of His hearers. (Luke 16:1-15)

“Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed... And do not seek what you shall eat, and what you shall drink, and do not keep worrying. For all these things the nations of the world eagerly seek, but your Father knows that you need these things... *Sell your possessions and give to charity.*” (Luke 12:13-34) Such words were spoken, not to a select few, but to all His followers.

Many ingenious methods have been devised over the centuries by professing Christendom to explain why Jesus did not mean what He said so plainly and so often, but the first Christians took His words seriously. We are told that no sooner had the early church begun to grow, than they “began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need.” (Acts 2:45) “And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own; but all things were common property to them... There was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales, and lay them at the apostles’ feet; and they would be distributed to each, as any had need.” (Acts 4:32-35) Oh, the joy that must have been present in such an assembly, that had learned by experience the truth of their Master’s words,

“It is more blessed to give than to receive!” (Acts 20:35)

A man or organization that knowingly hoards wealth in the face of a world full of pressing needs cannot seek shelter under the name of Christ. “Whoever has the world’s goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?” (I John 3:17) Yet, we are told today by professing ministers of Christ that God actually wants His children to be wealthy! “Faith” becomes a magic wand to fatten purses. This is indeed pseudo-Christianity.

We have been dealing here, it is true, primarily with what Christianity isn’t. But we tear down only with a view to building up; we root out only in order to plant. The accumulated rubble of two thousand years of man-made tradition must be a least partially cleared away before the one true foundation for all meaning and fulfillment can be securely laid down.

And, after all, perhaps more has been said about the positive nature of Christianity than we realize. It has been found to involve the worship of the true God, not via externals but in spirit and truth, not by meaningless repetition but in living fellowship. Christians are those who are characterized by sincerity and purity; their righteousness is not external only. They share their money with those in need and delight to do the will of God. Though they are far from perfect, and their sins and shortcomings are many and grievous, yet their innermost longing is to be what they should be, and their lives in general are moving closer and closer to God.

It may come as a revelation to some that the Christianity they have been rejecting is not the real thing anyway. At the same time, they may find it to be a little unsettling that their favorite “too-many-hypocrites-in-the-church” arguments are beginning to crumble, and that they are responsible to face the knowledge of the true Christ which is as near to them as the pages of the nearest New Testament.

Those of us who know Him echo His words of invitation, “Let him who is thirsty come!” “O taste and see that the Lord is good!”