

My Story

THIRTEENTH-CENTURY PHILOSOPHER THOMAS AQUINAS writes: “There is within every soul a thirst for happiness and meaning.” I first began to feel this thirst when I was a teenager. I wanted to be happy. I wanted my life to have meaning. I became hounded by those three basic questions that haunt every human life: Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going? I wanted answers, so as a young student, I started searching for them.

Where I was brought up, everyone seemed to be into religion, so I thought I might find my answers in being religious. I got into church 150 percent. I went every time the doors opened—morning, afternoon, or evening. But I must have picked the wrong church because I felt worse inside it than I did outside. From my upbringing on a farm in Michigan I inherited a rural practicality that says when something doesn’t work, get rid of it. So I chucked religion.

Then I thought that education might have the answers

to my quest for meaning, so I enrolled in a university. I soon became the most unpopular student among the professors. I would buttonhole them in their offices and badger them for answers to my questions. When they saw me coming, they would turn out the lights, pull down the shades, and lock their doors. You can learn many things at a university, but I didn't find the answers I was seeking. Faculty members and my fellow students had just as many problems, frustrations, and unanswered questions as I did.

One day on campus I saw a student wearing a T-shirt that read, "Don't follow me, I'm lost." That's how everyone in the university seemed to me. Education, I decided, was not the answer.

What Do You Think?

Do you agree with philosopher Thomas Aquinas that "There is within every soul a thirst for happiness and meaning"?

I began to think maybe I could find happiness and meaning in prestige. I would find a noble cause, dedicate myself to it, and in the process, become well known on

campus. The people with the most prestige in the university were the student leaders, who also controlled the purse strings. So I got elected to various student offices. It was a heady experience to know everyone on campus, to make important decisions, to spend the university's money getting the speakers I wanted and the students' money for throwing parties.

But the thrill of prestige wore off like everything else I had tried. I would wake up on Monday morning, usually with a headache because of the night before, dreading to face another five miserable days. I endured Monday through Friday, living only for the partying nights

of Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Then on Monday the meaningless cycle would begin all over again.

I didn't let on that my life was meaningless; I was too proud for that. Everyone thought I was the happiest man on campus. They never suspected that my happiness was a sham. It depended on my circumstances. If things were going great for me, I felt great. When things were going lousy, I felt lousy. I just didn't let it show.

I was like a boat out in the ocean, tossed back and forth by the waves. I had no rudder—no direction or control. But I couldn't find anyone living any other way. I couldn't find anyone who could tell me how to live differently. I was frustrated. No, it was worse than that. There's a strong term that describes the life I was living: hell.

About that time I noticed a small group of people—eight students and two faculty members—who seemed different from the others. They seemed to know who they were and where they were going. And they had convictions. It is refreshing to find people with convictions, and I like to be around them. I admire people who believe in something and take a stand for it, even if I don't agree with their beliefs.

It was clear to me that these people had something I didn't have. They were disgustingly

Everyone thought I was the happiest man on campus. But the life I was living was hell.

What Do You Think?

Do you like being around people with convictions? What makes it an invigorating experience? What makes it a frustrating one?

happy. And their happiness didn't ride up and down with the circumstances of university life; it was constant. They appeared to possess an inner source of joy, and I wondered where it came from.

Something else about these people caught my attention—their attitudes and actions toward each other. They genuinely loved each other—and not only each other, but the people outside their group as well. And I don't mean they just talked about love; they got involved in people's lives, helping them with their needs and problems. It was all totally foreign to me, yet I was strongly attracted to it.

Like most people, when I see something I want but don't have, I start trying to figure out a way to get it. So I decided to make friends with these intriguing people.

A couple of weeks later I sat around a table in the student union talking to some of the members of this group. The conversation turned to the topic of God. I was pretty

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skeptical and insecure about this subject, so I put on a big front. I leaned back in my chair, acting as if I couldn't care less.

“Christianity, ha!” I blustered. “That's for unthinking weaklings, not intellectuals.” Of course, under all the bluster I really wanted what these people had, but my pride didn't

want them to know the aching urgency of my need. The subject bothered me, but I couldn't let go of it. So I turned to one of the students, a good-looking woman (I used to think all Christians were ugly), and I said, “Tell me, why are

you so different from all the other students and faculty on this campus? What changed your life?”

Without hesitation or embarrassment she looked me straight in the eye, deadly serious, and uttered two words I never expected to hear in an intelligent discussion on a university campus: “Jesus Christ.”

“Jesus Christ?” I snapped.

“Oh, for God’s sake, don’t give me that kind of garbage. I’m fed up with religion. I’m fed up with the church. I’m fed up with the Bible.”

Immediately she shot back, “I didn’t say *religion*, I said Jesus Christ!” She pointed out something I had never known: Christianity is not a religion. Religion is humans trying to work their way to God through good works. Christianity is God coming to men and women through Jesus Christ.

I wasn’t buying it. Not for a minute. Taken aback by the young woman’s courage and conviction, I apologized for my attitude. “But I’m sick and tired of religion and religious people,” I explained. “I don’t want anything to do with them.”

Then my new friends issued a challenge I couldn’t believe. They challenged me to make a rigorous, intellectual examination of the claims of Jesus Christ—that he is God’s Son; that he inhabited a human body and lived among real men and women; that he died on the cross for the sins of humanity; that he was buried and was resurrected three

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days later; and that he is still alive and can change a person's life even today.

I thought this challenge was a joke. Everyone with any sense knew that Christianity was based on a myth.

What Do You Think?

How would you define religion?

I thought that only a walking idiot could believe the myth that Christ came back from the dead. I used to wait for Christians to speak out in the classroom so I could tear them

up one side and down the other. I thought that if a Christian had a brain cell, it would die of loneliness.

But I accepted my friends' challenge, mostly out of spite to prove them wrong. I was convinced the Christian story would not stand up to evidence. I was a prelaw student, and I knew something about evidence. I would investigate the claims of Christianity thoroughly and come back and knock the props out from under their sham religion.

If I could show that the Bible was historically untrustworthy, then I could show that Christianity was a fantasy made up by wishful religious dreamers.

I decided to start with the Bible. I knew that if I could uncover indisputable evidence that the Bible is an unreliable record, the whole of Christianity would crumble. Sure, Christians could show me that their own book said Christ was born of a vir-

gin, that he performed miracles, and that he rose from the dead. But what good was that? If I could show that the Bible was historically untrustworthy, then I could show

that Christianity was a fantasy made up by wishful religious dreamers.

I took the challenge seriously. I spent months in research. I even dropped out of school for a time to study in the historically rich libraries of Europe. And I found evidence. Evidence in abundance. Evidence I would not have believed had I not seen it with my own eyes. Finally I could come to only one conclusion: If I were to remain intellectually honest, I had to admit that the Old and New Testament documents were some of the most reliable writings in all of antiquity. And if they were reliable, what about this man Jesus, whom I had dismissed as a mere carpenter in an out-of-the-way town in a tiny oppressed country, a man who had gotten caught up in his own visions of grandeur?

I had to admit that Jesus Christ was *more* than a carpenter. He was all he claimed to be.

Not only did my research turn me around intellectually, but it also answered the three questions that started me on my quest for happiness and meaning. But as Paul Harvey says, that's the "rest of the story." I will tell you all about that at the end of this book. First, I want to share with you the core of what I

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What Do You Think?

If God did become man, what would be the best way for him to communicate to his creation?

learned in my months of research so that you, too, may see that Christianity is not a myth, not the fantasy of wishful dreamers, not a hoax played on the simpleminded. It is rock-solid truth. And I guarantee that when you come to terms with that truth, you will be on the threshold of finding the answers to those three questions: Who am I? What is my purpose? What is my destiny?

What Makes Jesus So Different?

SOMETIME AFTER MY DISCOVERIES ABOUT THE BIBLE AND Christianity, I was riding in a cab in London and happened to mention something about Jesus to the driver. Immediately he retorted, “I don’t like to discuss religion, especially Jesus.” I couldn’t help but notice the similarity of his reaction to my own when the young Christian woman told me that Jesus Christ had changed her life. The very name Jesus seems to bother people. It embarrasses them, makes them angry, or makes them want to change the subject. You can talk about God, and people don’t necessarily get upset, but mention Jesus, and people want to stop the conversation. Why don’t the names of Buddha, Muhammad, or Confucius offend people the way the name of Jesus does?

I think the reason is that these other religious leaders didn’t claim to be God. That is the big difference between Jesus and the others. It didn’t take long for people who knew Jesus to realize that this carpenter from Nazareth was making astounding claims about himself. It became

clear that those claims were identifying him as more than just a prophet or teacher. He was obviously making claims to deity. He was presenting himself as the only avenue to salvation and the only source of forgiveness of sins—things they knew that only God could claim.

For many people today Jesus' claim to be the Son of God is just too exclusive. In our pluralistic culture, it is too narrow and smacks of religious bigotry. We don't want to believe it. Yet the issue is not what we want to believe, but rather, who did Jesus claim to be? And is his claim true?

What Do You Think?

Jesus said he was the Son of God. Why is that a problem for many people? Why is it less offensive to talk about God than Jesus?

That's what I went to find out when I took up the gauntlet from my university friends.

I started by exploring all I could about the New Testament documents to see what they could tell us about this claim. I began to analyze the phrase "the deity of Christ" to see just what exactly was meant in the claim that Jesus

Christ is God. Augustus H. Strong, former president of Rochester Theological Seminary, in his *Systematic Theology* defines God as the "infinite and perfect spirit in whom all things have their source, support, and end."¹ This definition of God is adequate not only for Christians but also for all theists, including Muslims and Jews. Theism teaches that God is personal and that the universe was planned and created by him. God sustains and rules it in the present. But Christian theism adds an additional note to the definition: God became incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth.

The words *Jesus Christ* are not a first and last name;

they are actually a name and a title. The name Jesus is derived from the Greek form of the name *Jeshua* or Joshua, meaning “Jehovah-Savior” or “the Lord saves.” The title Christ is derived from the Greek word for Messiah (or the Hebrew *Mashiach*, see Daniel 9:26) and means “anointed one.” Two offices, king and priest, are indicated in the use of the title *Christ*. The title affirms Jesus as the promised priest and king of Old Testament prophecies. This affirmation is crucial to a proper understanding about Jesus and Christianity.

The New Testament clearly presents Christ as God. Most of the names applied to Christ are such that they could properly be applied only to one who was God. For example, Jesus is called God in the statement “while we look forward with hope to that wonderful day when the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, will be revealed” (Titus 2:13; see also John 1:1; Romans 9:5; Hebrews 1:8; 1 John 5:20-21). The Scriptures attribute characteristics to him that can be true only of God. They present Jesus as being self-existent (see John 1:2; 8:58; 17:5; 17:24); omnipresent (see Matthew 18:20; 28:20); omniscient (see Matthew 17:22-27; John 4:16-18; 6:64); omnipotent (see Matthew 8:26-27; Luke 4:38-41; 7:14-15; 8:24-25; Revelation 1:8); and possessing eternal life (see 1 John 5:11-12, 20).

Jesus received honor and worship that only God should receive. In a confrontation with Satan, Jesus said, “For the

The name Jesus means “Jehovah-Savior” or “the Lord saves.”
The title Christ is derived from the Greek word for Messiah and means “anointed one.”

Scriptures say, ‘You must worship the LORD your God and serve only him’ ” (Matthew 4:10). Yet Jesus received worship as God (see Matthew 14:33; 28:9) and sometimes

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even claimed to be worthy of worship as God (see John 5:23; Hebrews 1:6; Revelation 5:8-14). Most of the early followers of Jesus were devout Jews who believed in one true God. They were monotheistic to the core, yet as the following examples show, they recognized him as God incarnate.

Because of the apostle Paul’s extensive rabbinical training, he would be an unlikely person to attribute deity to Jesus, to worship a man from Nazareth and call him Lord. But this is exactly what Paul did. He acknowledged Jesus as God when he said, “Feed and shepherd God’s flock—his church, purchased with his own blood—over which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as elders” (Acts 20:28).

After Jesus asked his disciples who they thought he was, Simon Peter confessed, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). Jesus responded to Peter’s confession, not by correcting the man’s conclusion, but by acknowledging its validity and source: “You are blessed, Simon son of John, because my Father in heaven has revealed this to you. You did not learn this from any human being” (Matthew 16:17).

Martha, a close friend of Jesus, said to him, “I have always believed you are the Messiah, the Son of God” (John 11:27). Then there is the plainspoken Nathanael,

who didn't believe anything good could come out of Nazareth. He admitted to Jesus, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God—the King of Israel!" (John 1:49). While the first Christian martyr, Stephen, was being stoned, he cried out and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (Acts 7:59). The writer of the book of Hebrews calls Christ God when he writes, "To the Son he says, 'Your throne, O God, endures forever and ever' " (Hebrews 1:8).

Then, of course, we have Thomas, better known as "the doubter." (Perhaps he was a graduate student.) He said, "I won't believe it unless I see the nail wounds in his hands, put my fingers into them, and place my hand into the wound in his side" (John 20:25). I identify with Thomas. He was saying, "Look, not every day does someone raise himself from the dead or claim to be God incarnate. If you expect me to believe, I need evidence." Eight days later, after Thomas had expressed his doubts about Jesus to the other disciples, Jesus suddenly appeared. "Peace be with you,' he said. Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here, and look at my hands. Put your hand into the wound in my side. Don't be faithless any longer. Believe!' 'My Lord and my God!' Thomas exclaimed." (John 20:26-28). Jesus accepted Thomas's acknowledgment of him as God. He rebuked Thomas for his unbelief but not for his worship.

At this point a critic might interject that all these claims are from others about Christ, not from Christ about himself. People who lived at the time of Christ misunderstood



What Do You Think?

Would you consider yourself more of a Martha (always a believer) or a Thomas (a doubter) or a Nathanael (a cynic) in your attitudes about Jesus?

him as we misunderstand him today. They attributed deity to him, but he didn't really claim it for himself.

Well, when we delve deeper into the pages of the New Testament, we find that Christ did indeed make this claim. The references are abundant, and their meaning is plain. A businessman who scrutinized the Scriptures to verify whether or not Christ claimed to be God said, "Anyone who reads the New Testament and does not conclude that Jesus claimed to be divine would have to be as blind as a man standing outdoors on a clear day and saying he can't see the sun."

In the Gospel of John we have a confrontation between Jesus and a group of Jews. It was triggered by the fact that Jesus had cured a lame man on the Sabbath. (Jews were forbidden to do any work on the Sabbath.) "So the Jewish leaders began harassing Jesus for breaking the Sabbath rules. But Jesus replied, 'My Father is always working, and so am I.' So the Jewish leaders tried all the harder to find a way to kill him. For he not only broke the Sabbath, he

called God his Father, thereby making himself equal with God" (John 5:16-18).

You might say, "Look, Josh, I can't see how this proves anything. Jesus called God his Father. So what? All Christians call God their Father, but this doesn't mean they are claiming to be God." The Jews of Jesus' time heard in Jesus' words a

meaning that is easily lost to us now. Whenever we study a document, we must take into account the language, the culture, and especially the person or persons the document

What Do You Think?

Why do you think the Jewish leaders were so enraged with Jesus after he healed on the Sabbath? Was it because he did it on a sacred day or something else?

addresses. In this case, the culture is Jewish, and the persons addressed are Jewish religious leaders. And something about what Jesus said really got under their skin. “So the Jewish leaders tried all the harder to find a way to kill him. For he not only broke the Sabbath, he called God his Father, thereby making himself equal with God” (John 5:18). What could he have said to cause such

a drastic reaction? Let’s look at the passage and see how the Jews understood Jesus’ remarks more than two thousand years ago in their own culture.

Their problem was that Jesus said “*my* Father,” not “*our* Father.” By the rules of their language, Jesus’ use of this phrase was a claim to be

equal with God. The Jews did not refer to God as “my Father.” Or if they did, they would always qualify the statement by adding the phrase “in heaven.” However, Jesus did not add the phrase. He made a claim the Jews could not misinterpret when he called God “my Father.”

To make matters worse, by the phrase “My Father is always working, and so am I,” Jesus was putting his own activity on an equal plane with God’s. Again the Jews understood that he was claiming to be God’s Son. As a result, their hatred of Jesus grew. Until this point they had been seeking only to persecute him, but soon they began to plan to kill him.

Not only did Jesus claim equality with God as his Father, but he also asserted that he was one with the Father. During the Feast of the Dedication in Jerusalem, some of the other Jewish leaders approached Jesus and questioned

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him about whether he was the Christ. Jesus concluded his comments to them by saying, “The Father and I are one” (John 10:30). “Once again the people picked up stones to kill him. Jesus said, ‘At my Father’s direction I have done many good works. For which one are you going to stone me?’ ” (John 10:31-32).

One might wonder why the Jews reacted so strongly to what Jesus said about being one with the Father. The structure of the phrase in the Greek gives us an answer. A. T. Robertson, the foremost Greek scholar of his day, writes that in the Greek the word *one* in this passage is neuter, not masculine, and does not indicate one in person or purpose but rather one in “essence or nature.” Robertson then adds, “This crisp statement is the climax of Christ’s claims about the relation between the Father and himself [the Son]. They stir the Pharisees to uncontrollable anger.”²

It is evident that in this statement the Jews clearly heard Jesus claiming to be God. Thus, Leon Morris, former principal of Ridley College, Melbourne, writes that

the Jews could regard Jesus’ word only as blasphemy, and they proceeded to take the judgment into their own hands. It was laid down in the Law that blasphemy was to be punished by stoning (see Leviticus 24:16). But these men were not allowing the due processes of law to take their course. They were not preparing an indictment so that the authorities could take the requisite action. In their fury they were preparing to be judges and executioners in one.³

The Jews threatened Jesus with stoning for “blasphemy,” which tells us that they definitely understood his claim

to be God. But, we may ask, did they stop to consider whether or not this claim was true?

Jesus continually spoke of himself as one in essence and nature with God. He boldly asserted, “If you knew me, you would also know my Father” (John 8:19). “For when you see me, you are seeing the one who sent me” (John 12:45).

“Anyone who hates me also hates my Father” (John 15:23).

“Everyone will honor the Son, just as they honor the Father.

Anyone who does not honor the Son is certainly not honoring the Father who sent him”

(John 5:23). These references definitely indicate that Jesus

looked at himself as being more than just a man; he claimed to

be equal with God. Those who

say that Jesus was just closer or more intimate with God than others need to consider his statement, “Anyone who does not honor the Son is certainly not honoring the Father who sent him.”

While I was lecturing in a literature class at a university in West Virginia, a professor interrupted me and said that the only Gospel in which Jesus claimed to be God was John’s Gospel, and it was the latest one written. He then asserted that Mark, the earliest Gospel, never once mentioned that Jesus claimed to be God. This man simply had not read Mark carefully.

In response I turned to Mark’s Gospel, to a passage in which Jesus claimed to be able to forgive sins. “Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralyzed man, ‘My child, your sins

What Do You Think?

The Jews wanted to stone Jesus for blasphemy. Was their own guilt over not believing him beginning to convict them? Or were they just jealous of his popularity?

are forgiven” (Mark 2:5; see also Luke 7:48-50). According to Jewish theology, only God could say such a thing; Isaiah

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43:25 restricts forgiveness of sin to the prerogative of God alone. When the scribes heard Jesus forgiving the man’s sins, they asked, “What is he saying? This is blasphemy! Only God can forgive sins!” (Mark 2:7). Jesus then asked which would be easier to say to a paralyzed man, “Your sins are forgiven” or “Stand up, pick up your mat, and walk”?

According to *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, this is

an unanswerable question. The statements are equally simple to pronounce; but to say either, with accompanying performance, requires divine power. An imposter, of course, in seeking to avoid detection, would find the former easier. Jesus proceeded to heal the illness that men might know that he had authority to deal with its cause.⁴

At this the religious leaders accused him of blasphemy. Lewis Sperry Chafer, founder and first president of Dallas Theological Seminary, writes that

none on earth has either authority or right to forgive sin. None could forgive sin save the One against whom all have sinned. When Christ forgave

sin, as he certainly did, He was not exercising a human prerogative. Since none but God can forgive sins, it is conclusively demonstrated that Christ, since he forgave sins, is God.⁵

This concept of forgiveness bothered me for quite a while because I didn't understand it. One day in a philosophy class, answering a question about the deity of Christ, I quoted Mark 2:5. A graduate assistant challenged my conclusion that Christ's forgiveness of sin demonstrates his deity. He said that he could forgive people without the act's demonstrating any claim to be God. People do it all the time. As I pondered what the man was saying, the answer suddenly struck me. I knew why the religious leaders reacted so strongly against Christ. Yes, one can say, "I forgive you," but only if he is the one who has been sinned against. If you sin against me, I have the right to forgive you. But if you sin against someone else, I have no such right. The paralytic had not sinned against the man Jesus; the two men had never even seen each other before. The paralytic had sinned against God. Then along came Jesus, who under his own authority said, "Your sins are forgiven." Yes, we can forgive sins committed against us, but in no way can anyone forgive

What Do You Think?

In this instance, why do you think Jesus said to the paralyzed man, "Your sins are forgiven" instead of "Stand up and walk"?

What Do You Think?

Do you agree that no one can forgive sins committed against God except God himself?

sins committed against God except God himself. Yet that is what Jesus claimed to do.

It's no wonder the Jews reacted so violently when a carpenter from Nazareth made such a bold claim. This assertion that he could forgive sin was a startling exercise of a prerogative that belongs only to God.

Another situation in which Jesus claimed to be the Son of God was at his trial (see Mark 14:60-64). Those trial

We can forgive sins committed against us, but in no way can anyone forgive sins committed against God except God himself. Yet that is what Jesus claimed to do.

proceedings contain some of the clearest references to Jesus' claims of deity. "Then the high priest stood up before the others and asked Jesus, 'Well, aren't you going to answer these charges? What do you have to say for yourself?' Jesus made no reply. Then the high priest asked him, 'Are you the Messiah, the Son of the blessed God?' Jesus said, 'I am, and you will see me, the

Son of Man, sitting at God's right hand in the place of power and coming back on the clouds of heaven' " (Mark 14:60-62).

At first Jesus wouldn't answer, so the high priest put him under oath. Because Jesus was under oath, he had to answer (and I'm so glad he did). He responded to the question, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the blessed God?" by saying, "I am."

Jesus' reference to "the Son of Man" who would be "coming on the clouds of heaven," was an allusion to Daniel 7:13-14 (NASB):

More Than a Carpenter

I kept looking in the night visions,
And behold, with the clouds of heaven
One like a Son of Man was coming,
And He came up to the Ancient of Days
And was presented before Him.
And to Him was given dominion, Glory and
a kingdom,
That all the peoples, nations, and men of every
language
Might serve Him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion
Which will not pass away;
And His kingdom is one
Which will not be destroyed.

Despite the common misperception, the term “Son of Man” was not a reference to the humanity of Jesus, but to his divinity. When Jesus referred to himself as the Son of Man he was referring to his divinity. In *Putting Jesus in His Place*, Rob Bowman and Ed Komoszewski explain how this applies to Daniel’s vision:

In Daniel’s vision, the humanlike figure possesses all judgment authority and rules over an everlasting kingdom. The notion of frailty and dependence is absent. The description of the figure as coming with the clouds also identifies him as divine, since elsewhere in the Old Testament the imagery of coming on clouds is used exclusively for divine figures.⁶

Thus, in his allusion to Daniel 7:13, Jesus was claiming to be a divine, heavenly figure who would sit at God’s

right hand, exercising supreme authority over all people for eternity. No wonder the Jewish authorities were so upset—Jesus had committed blasphemy by claiming to be God! Clearly, Jesus had a divine self-consciousness.

An analysis of Christ's testimony shows that he claimed to be (1) the Son of the blessed God; (2) the One who would sit at the right hand of power; and (3) the Son of Man, who would come on the clouds of heaven. Each of these affirmations is distinctly messianic. The cumulative effect of all three is significant. The Sanhedrin, the Jewish court, caught all three points, and the high priest responded by tearing his garments and saying, "Why do we need other witnesses?" (Mark 14:63). They had finally heard it for themselves from Jesus' own mouth. He was convicted by his own words.

Sir Robert Anderson, who was once head of criminal investigation at Scotland Yard, points out:

No confirmatory evidence is more convincing than that of hostile witnesses, and the fact that the Lord laid claim to Deity is incontestably established by the action of His enemies. We must remember that the Jews were not a tribe of ignorant savages, but a highly cultured and intensely religious people; and it was upon this very charge that, without a dissenting voice, His death was decreed by the Sanhedrin—their great national Council, composed of the most eminent of their religious leaders, including men of the type of Gamaliel, the great first century Jewish philosopher and his famous pupil, Saul of Tarsus.⁷

It is clear, then, that this is the testimony Jesus wanted to bear about himself. We also see that the Jews understood his reply was his claim to be God. At this point they faced two alternatives: that his assertions were outlandish blasphemy or that he was God. His judges saw the issue clearly—so clearly, in fact, that they crucified him and then taunted him because “he trusted God. . . . For he said, ‘I am the Son of God’ ” (Matthew 27:43).

H. B. Swete, former Regius professor of divinity at Cambridge University, explains the significance of the high priest tearing his garment:

The law forbade the High Priest to rend his garment in private troubles (Leviticus 10:6; 21:10), but when acting as a judge, he was required by custom to express in this way his horror of any blasphemy uttered in his presence. The relief of the embarrassed judge is manifest. If trustworthy evidence is not forthcoming, the necessity for it had now been superseded: the Prisoner had incriminated Himself.⁸

We begin to see that this was no ordinary trial. As lawyer Irwin Linton points out,

Unique among criminal trials is this one in which not the actions but the identity of the

What Do You Think?

In some respects, doesn't the reaction of the Jewish leaders to Jesus' claims actually support those claims? If you had been a Jewish leader, what would you have done?

accused is the issue. The criminal charge laid against Christ, the confession or testimony or, rather, act in presence of the court, on which He was convicted, the interrogation by the Roman governor and the inscription and proclamation on His cross at the time of execution all are concerned with the one question of Christ's real identity and dignity. "What think ye of Christ? Whose son is he?"⁹

New York Supreme Court Justice William Jay Gaynor, in his address on the trial of Jesus, takes the position that blasphemy was the one charge made against him before

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the Sanhedrin. Referring to John 10:33, he says: "It is plain from each of the gospel narratives, that the alleged crime for which Jesus was tried and convicted was blasphemy: . . . Jesus had been claiming supernatural power, which in a human being was blasphemy."¹⁰

In most trials the accused are tried for what they are alleged to have done, but this was not the case in the trial of Jesus. He was tried for who he *claimed to be*.

The trial of Jesus should be sufficient to demonstrate convincingly that he confessed to his divinity. His judges attest to that claim. But also, on the day of Christ's crucifixion, his enemies acknowledged that he claimed to be God come in the flesh.

More Than a Carpenter

The leading priests, the teachers of religious law, and the elders also mocked Jesus. “He saved others,” they scoffed, “but he can’t save himself! So he is the King of Israel, is he? Let him come down from the cross right now, and we will believe in him! He trusted God, so let God rescue him now if he wants him! For he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’ ” MATTHEW 27:41-43