

— DIALOGUE #3 —

Socrates on Christology

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(Revised and edited by Jeffrey D. Breshears)

The following dialogue takes place in a seminar on Christology in the School of Religion of Desperate State University. The participants include **Professor Liberalis (PL)**, **Socrates (S)**, **Paula Postman (PP)**, **Sunshine Newage (SN)**, **Sophia Sikh (SS)**, **Navel Gazer (NG)**, **Chris Christian (CC)**, and **Thomas Keptic (TK)**. This dialogue focuses on the character and nature of the historical Jesus.

THE REFERENCE POINT IN HISTORY

Professor Liberalis: Now that we've introduced ourselves, I'd like us to discuss the nature of Christ. But first we'd better set this in an historical context since Socrates here lived and died some 400 years B.C.E.

Socrates: Excuse me, but what is B.C.E.?

PL: Oh, I'm sorry. I should have clarified that. B.C.E. means "Before the Common Era."

S: And I died when?

PL: Well, to be exact, you died in 399 B.C.E.

S: And what year is it now?

PL: This is the year 2014 – 2014 C.E. – meaning the 2014th year of the Common Era.

S: I see. Well, actually, I don't see. What marks the delineation between "Before the Common Era" and the "Common Era?" Did something monumental occur between B.C.E. and C.E.?

PL: "Before the Common Era" refers to the period before Jesus Christ was born. It used to be called "Before Christ," or "B.C." Likewise, the years after the birth of Christ were designated "A.D.," or *Anno Domini* – Latin for "In the Year of our Lord." In other words, "After Christ." Is that clear?

S: I suppose so. But you say the terminology used to be, "Before Christ" and "After Christ," but now it is "Before the Common Era" and the "Common Era." Yet I take it that the dividing line between B.C.E. and C.E. is still the same as between B.C. and A.D. – that is, the birth of Jesus Christ?

PL: That's correct. But keep in mind that any divisions in history are purely artificial. Time marches on irrespective of how we divide it. B.C.E. and C.E. are only artificial designations. Now let's move on.

S: Oh, one more question if you don't mind.

PL: All right. Quickly, please.

S: If you mark all time from the date of Christ, he must be exceedingly important. But when and why did the terms change to "Before the Common Era" and the "Common Era?" Why isn't it still referred to as "Before Christ" and "After Christ" if the reference point is the birth of Christ?

PL: Okay, I guess that's a fair question. B.C. and A.D. were the common terms until the 1980s when scholars began to realize how unfair and biased it was to force a Christ-centered dating system on the rest of the world. This reflected a Westernized, Christocentric bias that was a residual legacy of Western imperialism, and scholars came to realize that it wasn't sufficiently respectful of other cultures that don't have a Christian tradition. We need to be sensitive toward other people's traditions, and given the fact that we live in a world community that is becoming increasingly diverse and multi-cultural, it was considered politically incorrect to perpetuate the B.C. and A.D. dating system.

S: But you still date all of time from the birth of Christ, correct? You just prefer not to acknowledge it?

PL: Well, I wouldn't put it that way, but yes... that's essentially correct. It would have caused untold problems with historical dating to change the reference point.

S: And you consider that to be honest?

PL: Whether it's honest or not, I do not know. Furthermore, I really do not care. Like I said, any divisions in the flow of history are only artificial, and that goes for the central dividing line in history. What *does* matter is that we're sensitive to other cultures and their respective traditions.

S: Then may I ask you...

PL: I thought you said you had only one more question!

S: Oh, I meant one more question *at a time*. I can't help asking questions. It's the most efficacious way to learn.

PL: (*Sigh.*) All right. Proceed.

THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRIST

S: Thank you. What I want to know is why the traditional dating system was based on the birth of Jesus Christ. People must have regarded him as the most important person in history – is that right?

PL: Yes, many did.

S: Why?

Sunshine Newage: Because he taught us love! And he showed us how to live!

S: So he was a philosopher, then?

SN: Oh, yes – a great one!

S: And yet there have been other great philosophers since then, correct?

Paula Postman: Sure – there have been many.

S: So why is Jesus considered so much better than the others, to the point that you date all of history around him?

Navel Gazer: Because of his great teachings.

S: What did he teach that was so outstanding?

NG: I'm not sure. I'll have to think about that.

SN: Love!

NG: Uh, yeah. Love. That's right.

S: Just love?

SN: Mainly love. That is his supreme accomplishment. As The Beatles sang, "All you need is love!"

S: Yes, Paula mentioned that song the other day. I still don't have a clue what it refers to. But more to the point, keep in mind that *I* also taught about love, as did my student, Plato. In fact, all great philosophers have known that love is the greatest virtue. What makes Jesus different – and so much better – than all the others who have taught love?

NG: Not sure, man. I'll have to think about it.

TK: He was supposedly more radical than all the other teachers of love.

S: More radical? In what ways?

TK: Well, supposedly, he taught that you should love even your enemies.

S: So did I. By the way, why do you say, "supposedly?" Did he or did he not teach this?

TK: I say "supposedly" because I don't believe you can trust the sources – the Bible, you know. Virtually all we know of Jesus was written by his followers, who were obviously biased. There are no objective secular sources on the life and teachings of Christ.

S: Oh, I see. That is an issue that needs to be seriously pondered. But for now, since you say the Bible is virtually our only source of information on Jesus, we should focus on what it says about him.

TK: Fine with me – at least, for now.

PL: Actually, Socrates, the issue of whether the Bible is true or not is the subject of another course. I'd recommend that you sign up for Dr. Reviso's class on "Deconstructing the Bible."

S: "Deconstructing the Bible?" That strikes me as an odd name for a course that should be an objective search for truth. But if I can return to my question: What makes Jesus so special?

Chris Christian: He suffered and died for his beliefs.

S: That is impressive... but remember, so did I.

CC: Okay, then. He also gathered disciples and many others around him who believed in him, and over the past two thousand years millions of people have continued to believe in him and follow him. He's been enormously influential.

S: I had many disciples in my day, too, and throughout history I apparently have influenced millions of people's lives.

CC: Well, he also *lived* what he taught.

S: So did I – to the best of my ability.

Sophia Sikh: What impresses me about him is that he liberated people from ignorance and superstition and prejudice.

S: That *is* impressive. But remember, so did I.

SS: He taught an enlightened form of universal ethics.

S: Yes – so did I.

SN: He taught a sublime and universalistic path to union with God.

S: Depending upon exactly what you mean by that statement, I believe I also did that.

PP: He was a prophet – he spoke for God.

S: So was I! So were Moses, Isaiah, Ezekiel, John the Baptist, and dozens of other men and women in history.

PP: Socrates, I'm surprised at you! I thought you were more humble than that, but you're sounding insufferably arrogant! Do you actually think you're as great as Jesus Christ?

S: No, not at all – at least, not according to the modest amount that I know of him. On the contrary, I assume just the opposite. I would be totally undeserving if all of history were dated around me!

All I'm asking is why he was so much greater than me or anyone else. What is it that makes him so distinctive?

PP: I think we've told you.

S: No, you haven't. Everything you've said applies to me. You haven't told me how or why Jesus is greater.

STRANGE CLAIMS

PL: Okay, let me explain. This is the thing about Jesus: Many people believe strange superstitions about him – they believe he was God.

S: Excuse me?

PL: They believe he was God – God incarnate in human form.

S: You mean, *a* god?

PL: No, I mean, God with a capital 'G'. The Creator and Sustainer of the universe. The Source of all life. The Source of all morality.

S: You're pulling my hair!

PP: Uhhh... Socrates, I think you mean that Dr. Liberalis is pulling your *leg*. No, that's literally what they believe.

S: Christians believe that?

PL: Well, historically they do. But many modern Christians seriously question that.

S: Until now, I had a rather favorable opinion of Christians. They actually believe that this man, Jesus of Nazareth, was the supreme God of the universe?

PL: That's what they believe – or at least, that's what the ones who believe in the Jesus of the Bible believe.

S: And you say that until modern times, this was what Christians traditionally believed?

PL: Yes. But keep in mind, we're more enlightened now.

S: This is remarkable!

PL: Well, remember: People used to be quite superstitious.

S: Did Jesus' original followers believe this?

PL: Well, according to the Gospels, yes.

S: Gospels?

PL: The word literally means, "the Good News" – as in "the Good News of Jesus Christ." There are four Gospel accounts of Jesus in the New Testament, and collectively they provide nearly all the biographical information we have on the life and teachings of Christ. At least, that's what they claim to be, but many of us don't believe...

S: And what about later philosophers and theologians? Did the wisest of them believe this?

PL: Until modern times, most Western philosophers and theologians believed in the traditional view of Christ. Interestingly, even most of our great scientists believed it, too. But remember, this was before the dawn of the Enlightenment.

S: And what about your holiest, most spiritually-minded men and women?

PL: Oh, yes. They were even more unanimous.

S: Are they still?

PL: Probably – as far as I know. I really don't know too many people like that, personally. But you need to know that most professional theologians, such as myself, do not accept the traditional view any more.

S: Do all professional theologians reject the traditional view of Christ?

PL: No. There is a minority of extreme fundamentalists who still believe in the old superstitions.

S: Yes, I've heard that term, "fundamentalists," used often since I've been here. Tell me: Do the scholars who believe in the traditional view of Christ call themselves fundamentalists, or is that *your* term for them?

PL: Oh, most of them would probably reject the label, "fundamentalist." They would probably prefer to be called "conservative" or "evangelical."

S: I see. Now, is the traditional view of Jesus still the official teaching of the Christian churches?

PL: Technically, yes. Historically, all the creeds and confessions upheld the view that Christ was divine, the Son of God, and all the major denominations from Roman Catholic to Baptist agreed on that point. But as I said, many modern Christians, and even some major denominations, no longer accept the traditional view.

S: Now I must ask you again, what about Jesus' immediate followers – the disciples? They knew him personally, correct? And they believed he was divine?

PL: Yes.

S: All of them?

PL: Yes, according to the New Testament sources. But you need to know that there are other sources that present a different, more human view of Christ.

S: More human? So the New Testament writings do not present this Jesus as fully human?

PL: Well, yes. He ate and drank and slept and did most everything that normal humans do. But the New Testament writings also claim he was divine – "fully human and fully divine," as the early creeds put it. Of course, that's nonsense.

S: I do not know if it is nonsense or not. I would first want to examine the background and context for such a belief before dismissing it as nonsense. But tell me more about these other sources. Were they also written by eye-witnesses, and were they written as early as the New Testament Gospels?

PL: They are usually referred to as the Gnostic Gospels, and no, they were written at least a hundred years or more after Christ, but they could have been based on oral traditions dating back to the time of Christ.

S: *Could* have been?

PL: Yes.

S: Is there any real evidence to support the belief that they were?

PL: Well, nothing specific. But many of us suspect that they were.

S: Suspect?

PL: We have our reasons for believing they were. Remember, you have to keep in mind that we're professional scholars and theologians. We study the Bible and other ancient manuscripts for a living.

S: But not all biblical scholars hold to your position, correct?

PL: No. I've made it clear that a minority of biblical scholars – the fundamentalists – do not.

S: How many of these scholars are there who still believe in the traditional view of Christ? Are there just a few?

PL: Well, actually, there are thousands. Come to think of it, they may not be such a small minority after all. There may be about as many of them as there are of us progressives. It's just that I don't have much contact with them. They're not to be taken seriously.

S: And are they as well-educated as most of you – what do you call yourselves – progressives?

PL: Well, to be perfectly honest, many of them have the same educational backgrounds and credentials as many of us do.

S: And didn't you tell me a few minutes ago that most of them would not label themselves "fundamentalists?"

PL: No, of course not. That term is loaded with negative connotations. But as far as I'm concerned, they *are* fundamentalists. They're *all* behind the times. They're *all* living in the past. They are misleading people.

S: Misleading people?
You mean, by teaching the traditional view of Jesus Christ?

PL: By perpetuating myths! Old, out-dated myths!

S: So, if I may return more directly to the point, all of Jesus' early followers, all of the primary historical sources, and all of the earliest secondary sources are unanimous that he was divine – God incarnate?

PL: I've told you, yes – *if* we can trust the sources.

S: Yes, I realize we are keeping that an open question for now. But I am intrigued: What was the source of this belief that Jesus Christ was divine? Who started this rumor?

PL: Well, according to the Gospels, Jesus made that claim for himself.

S: So in the Gospels, Jesus actually claimed to be divine? That isn't just an interpretation?

PL: It's pretty plain what he said and what he meant. There's little ambiguity there.

S: What exactly did he say?

PL: Well, he referred to himself as the Son of God. He claimed to be sinless, and he claimed that he would die a sacrificial death to atone for the sins of all humanity. He claimed he would come at the end of time to judge the whole world. He said things like "I and the Father are one" and "He who has seen me has seen the Father" and "Before Abraham was, I AM."

S: That is astonishing!

PL: Really, now!

S: And this man was *sane*?

PL: Well, yes. No one thinks otherwise. He taught some very coherent and profound things, you know. As the others said a few minutes ago, he was one of the great philosopher/teachers in history. No one doubts that.

S: I do.

PL: You think he was insane?

S: Oh, no. I seriously doubt that he was merely a great philosopher. In fact, I'm certain he wasn't.



PL: Please continue. You seem to think you know an awful lot about a man who you knew so little of a few minutes ago!

S: I do *not* know that much about him – at least, not yet – but I *do* know *some* things based on common sense and logic. Do any of the rest of you believe what Jesus said about himself – that he was divine?

TK: Are you serious? No way!

PP: No.

SS: I find that hard to believe.

SN: I think we're *all* divine! We *all* experience Godness. We *all* share in the collective cosmic consciousness of this universe. It's just that Jesus recognized his divinity, and most people do not.

Others: (*A collective groan.*)

NG: I'm not sure. I haven't thought through it sufficiently.

CC: Well, *I* believe he was God. *I* believe what the Bible says about Jesus.

S: Then only you, Chris, have any basis for believing that Jesus was a true prophet, an enlightened philosopher, and an inspired teacher.

Others: What?

Huh?

Why?

That's not fair!

That's judgmental!

S: Please let me explain before you symbolically crucify me as a heretic. Keep in mind that Jesus claimed to be God! This is what the earliest and, presumably, best sources tell us – the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament. This is also what all of his earliest followers believed. And I understand that many of them died a horrible martyr's death rather than deny their belief.

Now if what Jesus said is true, then only Chris is right. Listen: A man who claimed to be the divine Son of God cannot be a wise man, a great philosopher, or a true prophet. Rather, we should dismiss him as either insane or evil.

TK: No one thinks he was insane or evil. We all accept the fact that he was one of the wisest and best men who ever lived. If even a small part of the Gospels are accurate, he was both *good* and *brilliant*. There's no reason to believe otherwise.

SN: I think we can *all* have the same God-consciousness that Jesus experienced! We're *all* spiritual beings having a physical experience!

PP: (*Mumbles under her breath:*) Oh, puhleeze! Gag me with a crystal!

TK: Sunshine, take a pill – a reality pill!

S: I'd like to address Sunshine's comment, but first let me ask you, Thomas, why you would believe the most illogical thing about Jesus? Why would you call someone who claimed to be God a "good," "wise," and "brilliant" man?

PL: Socrates, let me jump in here. After all, it *is* my class – or at least it's *supposed* to be! Your basic problem is that you're too rigid and too logical about all of this. Excuse me for saying it, but you sound terribly simplistic. That's the kind of black-and-white thinking that is dangerous! You sound like a fundamentalist.

S: Oh, no – there's that word again. Is there an objective definition for that word, or do you use it only to put down people who disagree with you?

PL: It has an objective definition...

TK: Professor Liberalis, excuse me, but I must respectfully disagree. I don't believe that something can be *too* logical. If something's logical, it's right. If it's illogical, it's wrong. I agree that there's a problem in Socrates' analysis, but I don't think it's because he's "too logical."

PL: Well, here's the problem. Jesus could have meant *many* things when he claimed to be divine – if in fact he ever really said it at all.

SN: That's what I've been saying! It's just like when Shirley MacLaine was taking that walk on the beach and it suddenly dawned on her: *I am God!* I think Jesus must have had an epiphany like that! You all oughta read her biography, *Out On a Limb*. It's absolutely transplendent!

PP: (*Mumbles under her breath.*) The title should have been, *Out of My Mind*.

(*She begins softly whistling the theme from The Twilight Zone.*)

PL: Uh, Sunshine, that's not exactly what I had in mind.

S: Well, what *would* Jesus have meant?

PL: I'm not certain. As you know, there were many concepts of God – or the gods – in Greco/Roman culture. The ancients were polytheistic, and there were hundreds of gods in circulation.

S: Yes, I know. You're talkin' 'bout my generation.

PP: Hey, that's the coolest thing I ever heard you say, Socrates! You been listenin' to The Who?

S: Who?

PP: Yeah. How come you know The Who but not The Beatles?

PL: Pardon me, but can we get back on track?

PP: Sure. You da man.

PL: Pardon me?

PP: Uh, I said, "Sure."

GOING TO THE SOURCE

TK: Professor, I think I can answer Socrates' question. I don't think it's complicated at all. When Jesus referred to God, he was speaking as a Jew to other Jews in a Jewish cultural context. He obviously meant YHWH, the God of the Jews. He wasn't speaking in a Greco/Roman context or a Hindu context. I assume his listeners knew full well what he meant when he claimed, "I and the Father am one" and "If you've seen me, you've seen the Father." When he declared, "Before Abraham was, I AM," that was a direct reference to the infinite Creator of the universe – not to Zeus or some impersonal cosmic principle such as Brahman.

S: I agree. So what kind of God was the God of the Jews?

PL: Well, you have to read the Bible to know that.

S: But I thought you don't believe the Bible?

PL: Well, we're talking about two different issues here. I have no problem believing that the Bible accurately relates what the ancient Jews believed about God. I just draw the line at miracles and all that superstitious stuff, like when Jesus walks on water and claims to be "the way, the truth, and the life."

S: Superstitious or supernatural?

PL: What?

S: You said you didn't believe in "all that superstitious stuff." Did you mean "superstitious" or "supernatural?"

PL: I don't distinguish between the two. Do you?

S: Oh, definitely. One is logically plausible, while the other is not.

PL: Well, I don't agree. But let's not get off on another tangent.

S: I agree. So how do we gain more clarity into what Jesus meant when he declared himself to be divine?

PL: Through a systematic study of the Scriptures – the Hebrew "Old Testament." Here's a list of books on Jewish religion, Jewish theology, the concept of the Messiah, and other relevant topics. We can use these as our basic sources for discussing these issues.

S: But these are all recent books.

PL: Yes. They represent the most up-to-date scholarship on the subject.

S: But shouldn't we establish our foundation before erecting our building? Shouldn't we gather our data before trying to interpret it?

PL: Oh, **exegesis** before **hermeneutics**, huh?

Others: Huh? Exa-what? Herman who?

S: Yes! I know those words – those are *Greek* terms. That's precisely what I had in mind. Let's do it methodically and rationally. Let's do exegesis first – let's examine the texts to see what they actually say. Then we can go on to hermeneutics – the interpretation and application of the texts. Isn't that sensible?



PL: It's time-consuming.

S: But time is of secondary consideration when pursuing such a vital issue as, "Who was Jesus?" After all, this *is* a course on Christology, is it not?

PL: Yes, but I prefer to deal with modern theological interpretations and controversies rather than going over the same old ground time-after-time.

S: But you teach primarily for the benefit of your students, not yourself. Isn't that true?

PL: Uh... yeah, sure. But I have studied this material for years. I think I have a lot to say that my students need to hear.

S: But wouldn't it be better if they had a solid foundation on which to assess what you say? I'm sure they would appreciate your brilliance on the subject all the more!

PL: I hope you're not being facetious. So what do you propose?

S: I would like to read the Jewish Scriptures. I have never done so, and apparently, most of those in this class haven't, either. If what Thomas says is true, we would learn much about the cultural context in which Jesus operated. We would also learn much about the Jewish concept of God, their beliefs about a Messiah, and so on.

I don't doubt that each of us would read and interpret this material in accord with his or her own particular values and presuppositions. But shouldn't we at least *try* to read and interpret the material as objectively and fairly as possible?

PL: What do the rest of you think?

TK: I like the idea. I know I'll never read the Bible unless it's part of a class assignment. I think it would be insightful.

CC: I think Socrates is right. I think we should start with what the Bible says about Judaism.

PP: Yeah, there's some funky stuff in the Bible. I'd like to read it.

SN: Far out! I've read some in the Bible, but not too much. It's sorta like the Qu'ran, isn't it? Hey, would anybody like to borrow my copy of *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus?* It's really cool!

PL: That's not exactly on the subject.

SS: That's fine with me. It seems like the right place to start.

NG: I don't know. I'll have to think about it. I didn't know we were gonna have to read a lot for this course. I heard that mostly all we do is show up for class and listen to Dr. Liberalis' lectures. I'm not really into reading too much. I've got a social life, you know.

PL: I'll let that last comment pass. By the way: Do you all know what you're in for? The Old Testament is very long – about 2,000 pages in most Bibles.

NG: Oooh, that's long. I don't think I've read 2,000 pages in my whole life.

SS: That's a lot to absorb.

SN: I hope there's lots of pictures!

PP: Isn't there a *Reader's Digest* condensed version? Maybe we should just read that.

SS: I think there are abridged versions on the Internet.

CC: You don't have to read the *whole* Old Testament – just mainly the theological parts.

PL: Okay, let's do it this way: Let's each go our own separate way, and read whatever you think would be useful and interesting. You can either read off my reading list or in the Old Testament. If you'd like any suggestions, I'll be glad to direct you.

S: Shouldn't we all read something in common? Can't we all just read the Old Testament?

PL: I think not. Like I said, it's very long.

S: But we have a week before next class. Two thousand pages... that's less than 300 pages a day.

PL: Too much. Keep in mind that students today have a lot to keep up with, including all the demands of social media. But go and read what you will. Your assignment is to be prepared to discuss Jewish religion and Jesus' Jewish background, and especially the Jewish concept of God. I'll see you all here again next week – except perhaps for you, Mr. Gazer.

NG: I'm definitely gonna have to give this some serious consideration. See, I was told we weren't gonna have to...

PL: Okay. Time's up. Class dismissed!

Oh, Mr. Gazer, please stop by my office after class. We need to have a chat.