

# PART THREE

## THE COMMON SENSE AND FAITHFUL ALTERNATIVE

In this section I put forth my proposal for a new interpretation of our faith that is in keeping with both the message of Jesus the Christ and our common sense. In Chapter Ten we pursue the theme of Jesus as the functional Christ, as he through whom we focus our understanding and faith, he whose life and message are central to the way we choose to live. We see that this is not only indisputable, but also that since Jesus is the answer to our deepest question—the question of meaning—this is also to claim for him the most that could possibly be claimed, a special role that can only be called sacred.

In Chapter Eleven we prepare for our discussion of God. We ask whether our common sense allows for this at all and demonstrate that in spite of a few extremists, it does indeed. Then we look at the straightforward rules of language for talking about God or anyone else, and at what kind of verification is appropriate.

In Chapter Twelve we finally talk about God. We note some wondrous aspects of reality that point towards God—we are not looking for a magical “proof”—and we describe how we can speak of God acting. We briefly address a few questions about the nature of God before suggesting a few images that might help to communicate our understanding of God.

In Chapter Thirteen we are then able to consider the question of Jesus' authority. We put forth several reasons which support the choice of Jesus of Nazareth as our compass, but we recognize that in the final analysis it is a question of values, of the heart.

In Chapter Fourteen we begin a look at some more traditional doctrinal themes to see if we can offer a positive reconstruction for their use today. We conclude that we must continue our use of the concept of "sin", but that the ideas of "original sin" and "salvation" are too tied up with an unchristian view of God and must be discarded.

In Chapter Fifteen we continue reconstruction by proposing the category of Christian Myth as a positive category for those aspects of the Christian story which exemplify or reinforce Christian values but which can no longer be taken as true. There is no reason for this to be seen as a negative classification. We then look at various aspects of the Jesus story to see what would qualify.

Then we move on to Part Four, a consideration of the real stumbling block: living as a Christian.

## CHAPTER 10: JESUS AS THE (FUNCTIONAL) CHRIST: INDISPUTABLE, SUFFICIENT, AND SACRED

Jesus answered . . . "For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth." (John 18:37)

### Indisputable

When I say that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ I mean that he is central to my understanding of God, of reality and of life. Jesus is the Christ because he plays this particular function or role for me. The question of a different "nature" or "being" has no interest. We do not have to appeal to a supernatural birth or a divine commission. We refer instead to simple historical fact.

For the fact of the matter is that the basic attitudes that make up my faith are based either directly or indirectly on Jesus of Nazareth. This is true for my understanding of religion and of the purpose of life. It is true for the principles with which I address questions of public and private ethics. These are all the result of my exposure to (1) the life and words of Jesus of Nazareth as contained in the Gospels; (2) the Church whose purpose and intent (if not whose actual accomplishment all of the time) is to promote and live according to his teachings and example; and (3) individuals who have tried to live out their lives according to the precepts of Jesus. These three sources shaped my basic attitudes. This cannot be disputed. And this makes Jesus of Nazareth and his heritage the most important focus to my whole approach to life. If, in addition, I recognize and embrace this fact, and commit myself to strengthening the efficacy of this focus and putting my whole life in line with it, then I accept Jesus as the Christ and I am a Christian.

Of course, it could be said that all of Western culture is pervaded by the direct and indirect influence of Jesus of Nazareth simply because of the dominant role of the Christian Church in shaping our heritage. Sim-

ply to acknowledge this historical fact does not make anyone a Christian. But to claim Jesus and his message as the central focal point of one's own life—not by default but by free and serious personal choice—is to confess him as the Christ, and is what distinguishes a person as a Christian. Please note: we must claim Jesus' message as our focal point not only with our words. There are far too many people who consider themselves Christians but whose lives are obviously focused on serving mammon or serving themselves. We must claim Jesus as our focus by the way we order our priorities and make our decisions and live our lives.

To the extent that we practice what we profess and that we profess the values of Jesus the Christ, it is beyond dispute that Jesus plays this role of focus for us as Christians. But is this sufficient? Is this adequate? Can it be enough to claim that Jesus is the Christ if by this we mean only that he is the one we choose to follow? What reason is there to follow someone whose status depends on our choosing to follow him, someone for whom we claim neither divinity nor infallibility nor pre-selection by God?

### Sufficient

To answer this we must first of all consider what we are asking in the question, "Who is Jesus?" Throughout the centuries the Church has maintained, sometimes in so many words, that "Jesus is the answer." So when we say who Jesus is, we are saying what the answer is. And when we say what the answer is, we are saying what we believe the *question* to be.

For his immediate disciples the question was how to explain this man who made such an impact on their lives and who was obviously (to them) on a mission from God. They naturally looked to their Scriptures (the Old Testament) both to try to understand this man and also to meet their need to show that he was indeed the one who was prophesied to come. This last was soon taken for granted by Christians, but in each succeeding era the Church emphasized that aspect of Jesus of Nazareth which answered the most deeply felt questions of their age.

Thus for those whose primary concern was how to escape their bondage to sin, Jesus was the Savior who offered forgiveness. For those trapped in serfdom or slavery, it was belief in Jesus that offered the promise of a better afterlife. For those oppressed by the evil and finitude of this world, Jesus was the perfect and infinite God coming into our midst. To be the answer for people whose most deeply felt need was release from sin or escape from the evils of the world—people whose common sense was different from ours—it was fitting that Jesus should be sinless and divine.

But times change. The dominant questions with which we address life now do not have to do with how to save ourselves from sin or how to ensure ourselves the best destination after death. Not that these are inconsequential! I, for one, believe they are still extremely important. But they have become secondary to the question that consciously or unconsciously pervades our society: the question of meaning. Our most pressing and tormenting questions have to do with the discovery of meaning, meaning and purpose in the midst of the joys and sorrows, hopes and fears of *this* life.

So, back to our original question: is this functional manner of identifying Jesus as the Christ—as he who is the focus of our basic attitudes and understandings—sufficient? One might ask in return, “Sufficient for what?” The answer to this is perhaps obvious, but it is very important: it must be sufficient for *our* needs and *our* faith and *our* common sense, not for the needs and faith and common sense of some other people or some other time.

To some people it may seem to be claiming “more” for Jesus to claim that he was divine or perfect or atoned for our sins. But none of these makes sense to us, and to claim things which make no sense is not to claim more, but to claim nothing at all. Furthermore, none of these speaks to our deepest question. If we were hungry and someone offered us a work of art, saying it was worth more than food, our hunger would not be satisfied. Likewise, if we were seeking beauty but someone offered us a meal, saying food is worth more, we would not be satisfied. Food is not “more” to someone seeing beauty; art is not “more” to someone who is hungry. In this same way, to claim a special nature for Jesus of Nazareth or to say that he was sinless is *not* to claim more for him if what we are seeking is purpose and meaning. In fact, these claims miss the mark and are of no value to us at all.

On the other hand, if we were able to claim (in a way consistent with our common sense) that Jesus of Nazareth provides the answer to our deepest question and provides the center of our faith, then this would be to claim for him the most that could possibly be claimed for anyone. And this is precisely what we do when we claim that Jesus is the Christ, meaning that it is he, in the main thrust of his life and message, that serves as the center point of our faith and the focus to our understanding of the meaning and purpose of life.

Now if someone were to make the observation as a sociologist or historian that Jesus is the Christ, they would be making the objective (and basically indisputable) statement that he is the one whom Christians claim to follow. But for us to make the claim *as Christians* that Jesus is the Christ is to claim much more than this. It is to say that we orient our approach to life according to his message. And this is to claim that Jesus of Nazareth is *right*, that his perceptions are correct and his

teachings true. In so doing we are making the audacious and even outrageous claim that the essential nature of God is love, that loving God and loving one's neighbor as oneself are the basis for all right action, that returning love for hate and forgiveness for injury is a greater victory than vengeance or conquest, and that giving of oneself for others is the highest achievement. We are saying that these insights of Jesus of Nazareth are the Truth, and that by this Truth we define the purpose and meaning of our own lives.

Whatever may have been the case in past centuries, the question of meaning is the most important question in our lives today. Therefore to claim that Jesus of Nazareth, as the Christ, provides us with the answer is to claim the most that could possibly be claimed on his behalf. In fact, to say that Jesus is the Christ and to mean by this that he provides the compass, the focus, by which we find the meaning and purpose in our life, is to claim for the Christ a special role and value that can only be called sacred.

### The Sacred

What is "the sacred"? What does it mean to be sacred? This is one of those concepts that is difficult to define but for which we have a reasonably good feeling. We know how we feel towards that which is sacred for us: it is special and set apart. It is "tabu", untouchable, not subject to being questioned in the same way as other things. It is of such value that it inspires awe and reverence.

Sometimes it is a place that is sacred: a temple or a mountain. These were originally places that belonged to God or where God was thought to dwell. Later these were places that were dedicated to God, to the service or worship of God. These places were often approached in certain specified ways that indicated reverence and awe.

For the Biblical literalist the text of the Bible is sacred in much the same way. It derives from God in a special way and shares somehow in the divine attribute of perfection. It is thus to be approached with awe and worship, not with analysis and criticism.

Certain objects are often considered sacred. This is generally due to their use in worship or to their association with holy people considered to have a special relationship to God. These objects are handled with special care and honor, treated with reverence.

Certain obligations are considered to be "sacred duties". These may or may not be duties to God. They are obligations that are unquestionable, that supersede all others, that must be honored even at significant hardship and cost.

I will not essay a definition of the sacred here. I do not know of one that I consider adequate; this may be a task for poetry rather than prose.

Nevertheless, we have pointed to the ineffable height and depth of what it means to be sacred. And when I claim for Jesus of Nazareth the role of the Christ, the role of focus or compass for my understanding of God and of the purpose of life, I am claiming for him a role that is nothing less than this.

The fact that Jesus is right in his understanding of God and life would not in itself give him a sacred position. Something cannot be sacred unless it is sacred to somebody. It is our recognizing and embracing his message as giving us the deepest truths about God and reality that establish him as a sacred office. If our greatest question is one of meaning, then the one who provides the answer has a role that inspires awe, reverence and mystery. (We may take it for granted until we lack it, but the presence of meaning in our lives is a far greater mystery than is its absence.) In his role as the Christ, Jesus is set apart just as much as Mt. Sinai or the Great Temple, though his sacredness is in some ways more like that of a sacred obligation in that it cannot be located entirely outside of us. In the importance of his role, in his set-apartness, in the way we incorporate him into our value system, the Christ is clearly in the category of the sacred.

#### Why Bother With The Sacred?

Why bother with the sacred? It has been going out of fashion for several centuries now. We tend to associate it with superstition or with such things as the sacred cow or a sacred volcano. We expect to encounter it only in anthropological reports about "primitive" people.

Certainly we do not think of God as being located in a particular object or place. In fact it often seems that quite literally nothing is sacred anymore.

Why, then, do I—the apostle of reason and common sense—seek to revive this concept? Is this not one world? Is not God everywhere, in everything? How, then, can we give special distinction to anything by calling it sacred?

At one time it made sense to claim that certain places or objects were sacred. There was the Mountain of God, the Temple of God, the Ark of the Covenant. But—again—our common sense has changed, and this understanding of the sacred could not survive this change.

But if we cannot locate the sacred in particular places or objects outside of us—what about finding it within us? In fact we all need the sacred to give our lives direction. Certain things must be set apart from and above everything else.

It is true that many people give this primacy to such things as comfort and security, to their physical appetites or to a desire for pleasure, fame and fortune. But these cannot support the weight we put on them. If we allow them to direct our lives they lead ultimately to spiritual emptiness and moral bankruptcy.

If we would give our lives a shape and meaning that is worthy of us we must guide them with higher values. We must recognize that that which gives direction to our lives is the "sacred" for us, and we must give this status only to that which is worthy of it.

But the sacred is not entirely within us. It is rather in the focus-giving relationship between Jesus of Nazareth and us who are Christians, in the role that he plays for us, that makes him the Christ. Reviving the concept of the sacred is the only way that we can do justice to the importance of this function of Jesus the Christ. (And since we can adequately describe Jesus' functional role only by using the concept of the sacred, can we doubt that this role is a sufficient way of identifying who he is?)

At this point we need to say more about places and objects. It is true that they cannot be sacred in the sense of God being in them in a special way. But if they cannot be sacred in and of themselves, in this older sense, they *can* share in the sacredness of the meaning-giving role of the Christ. If a certain object or place is especially connected for us with the Christ function, if a place of worship highlights and strengthens this role for us, if a certain book such as the Bible originates and supports and elucidates it, then these participate in the sacredness of the Christ. This is a derivative sacredness, but a true sacredness nonetheless. Those places and things which for us are associated with the Christ function share in the sacredness of this role.

### What About Revelation?

We have seen in this chapter that to identify Jesus as the Christ in this functional way is not only indisputable and adequate, but is also to give him the greatest distinction possible. We have turned aside from Christologies that were suitable to different ages and different questions. And we have put in their place a way of identifying Jesus that addresses our questions of meaning and that ties him once again with the sacred.

We ought to consider one more question here. It is common for theologians to speak of God as revealed (or self-revealed) in Jesus of Nazareth. How does this fit with our functional identification of Jesus as the Christ?

If to say that God was revealed in Jesus implies that God intervened in the world in a special way, that God went "zap", then we cannot go along with this. Our common sense will not allow it. But this does not rule out saying that God was revealed in Jesus in a special way if we mean by this that the special action was on Jesus' part. And in fact this is just what we claim when we say that through his life and teaching we learn the deepest truths about the nature of God. We are claiming that in Jesus we find these truths revealed. That is what makes him the Christ.