

CHAPTER 13: WHY JESUS OF NAZARETH?

“Wisdom is justified by all her children.”

(Jesus, Luke 7:35)

“Take him yourself and judge him.”

(Pilate, John 18:31)

If God is in the processes, if God is the context, if God is not a specific interventionist . . . then how can this Jesus of Nazareth be related to God any differently than anyone else? How can we justify looking to the Christ for meaning any more than looking to Nietzsche or the Buddha or your next-door neighbor? Or your own selfish desires?

In previous chapters we have shown why we cannot identify Jesus either as God incarnate or as a person specially sent or chosen by God. God just doesn't work that way. Instead, we identify Jesus as “the Christ”, meaning by this that it is he whose life and teachings function as the focus for our understanding of reality. It is he through whom we find meaning in our lives, and in whom we find the key to our understanding of God.

The interpretations of Jesus which we can no longer use—as God incarnate or as specially chosen—did have the advantage of making a clear claim about his authority to speak of God and moral truths. But how do we justify now our claim of Jesus' role as key to our understanding of God, as focus to the whole complex of meaning in our lives?

In traditional language this is the question of authority: the question of the authority of Jesus Christ. But why do we speak of “authority” here? What does it mean in the realm of value and meaning and common sense theology to speak of authority?

The Question of Authority

Usually when we speak of authority we are referring either to the state, that is, the authority of the government vested in certain positions

and so in the people who hold those positions, or to the legal authority that derives from ownership or contract. Obviously, this is not the kind of authority that we mean here.

We also commonly speak of someone being an authority on a certain subject, meaning that he or she is recognized as an accepted source of expert opinion in that area.

Or we might recognize the moral authority of an individual, either because of their relationship to us (e.g. parent) or because of something about their life or wisdom.

These three types of authority—legal, expert, and moral—were combined in first century Palestine in a way that is foreign to us today. Scripture was the highest authority, of course (within the limits set by Roman law). Legal decisions, whether by local lawyers or the high council in Jerusalem, were in fact interpretations of God's will as found in the Scriptures. And interpretations were generally made by citing recognized (authoritative) rabbis.

Jesus of Nazareth, however, was neither a member of the high council nor a local official nor a recognized rabbi. Naturally, then, the people who heard him "were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes." (Mark 1:22) Two questions must be answered: first, what was the source of this authority? That is, how was he able to speak this way and be recognized this way in first century Palestine? And second, does this translate into authority for us today? If so, how? And with what meaning of authority?

Jesus' Authority in First Century Palestine

He spoke as one who had authority. He did not just repeat the traditions of the elders or justify what he said by the teachings of Rabbi somebody-or-other. "You have heard that it was said of old," he said, "but I say to you . . ."

How was he able to do this? Because he was sure of himself. He knew he could sense the pull of the God that spoke through the law and the prophets, and knew that he had to point the way to others. So he did.

He saw that some were perverting justice and that others were trapped in their own greed. He saw that some tried to be faithful but couldn't get past their lists of rules and that others stood in the need of the freeing word of God's love. So he acted accordingly, and he did so with self-assurance.

This sort of moral certainty is much out of favor today, being identified in our minds with fascists and Ayatollahs and other out-of-touch-with-reality fanatics. Too often we have heard the narrow-minded offer simplistic solutions to complex problems. We have, rightly, rejected these so-called "solutions". We have recognized that there are no easy answers.

But it seems that we have often gone one step further: we justify our own confusion by being suspicious of *any* certainty, and we interpret the lack of easy answers to mean that any answer is as good as another, that we cannot be sure about right and wrong.

This last step is a tragic and inexcusable surrender of human moral responsibility. Even if we cannot know the answer to all of society's ills, even if we cannot pretend to know how to solve the problems of crime and drugs and inflation and poverty, we can still proclaim that it is obviously and unquestionably a moral wrong to maintain a penal system based on vengeance instead of rehabilitation; to allow human rights violations to go unchallenged (on either side of the iron curtain); to waste vast quantities of food and resources while others are malnourished and sick and poor; or to allow so many children in our own midst to go through childhood unwanted and unloved and even abused. The lack of easy solutions cannot be used as an excuse to cease recognizing and proclaiming right and wrong.

Jesus of Nazareth did not surrender this responsibility. He proclaimed right and wrong. He spoke with the authority of someone who saw clearly, someone who was not distracted or blinded by self-interest, someone who was not a prisoner to societal conventions. But most simply, he spoke with authority because he spoke from his own deep convictions.

So he preached his call to God, his call to love and repentance and reconciliation, with courage and conviction and charisma. And he preached it in such a way that his listeners were presented with a choice. They felt compelled to either accept or reject his message. Indeed, this is not an unusual reaction to someone who is secure in who they are and sure of their vision.

Those who responded positively to his message recognized him as having authority as their leader and teacher. Those who responded negatively also recognized the claim of authority in the way he taught and acted, but they rejected this claim.

So we can explain a claim to authority in first century Palestine in terms of convictions and charisma and a demand for decision. But how do we address the question of the authority of Jesus of Nazareth today?

The Question of Jesus' Authority Today

The question of Jesus' authority today cannot be answered by an appeal to his compelling presence or to ancient Near Eastern understandings. Rather we must look at our own response to his life and teachings. And we need to address three different questions here: (1) What is involved in recognizing in Jesus, or attributing to Jesus, authority? (2) How do we justify this in terms of our common sense theology?

(3) Why recognize authority in this person rather than in someone else or in no one at all?

1. What Does It Mean to Recognize Jesus' Authority?

There are three steps involved in an individual recognizing the authority of Jesus of Nazareth. The first step is a real awareness of who he is. This does *not* mean the vague and comfortable awareness that we get from our culture—and all too often from our churches and church schools—that Jesus was a good guy who talked about love. Neither does this mean an awareness of creeds, or an ability to say that Jesus Christ is Lord or Savior or Son of God or whatever. To begin with we need to seriously confront the life and teachings of Jesus himself. If this is done earnestly and sincerely we will be forced to ask ourselves whether indeed he may have been right, whether he knew what he was about, whether he did in fact correctly perceive God and truth, value and meaning.

The second step in an individual's recognition of Jesus' authority is an affirmative answer to this, a recognition on our part that, yes indeed, this guy *was* right in his central message. He had the key: service of others and of God is our greatest purpose; love in return for hate is the greatest triumph; there is something in life more important than our own selfish fears and desires. Step two is thus the recognition that Jesus of Nazareth points to the truth, that here we have an accurate compass.

This in itself would be to recognize a certain authority in this person. But this remains only an abstract authority, an authority that we recognize for others but not ourselves, unless we move on to step three. This third step is the decision that since Jesus was right, we will try to live by his teachings. Since he illustrated the way to live in accordance with truth and meaning, we will follow his lead in orienting our own lives. Or, to put it another way, after deciding that here we have an accurate compass (step two), we now decide to follow where it points (step three). In the terminology we used earlier, this is what makes us Christians; this is what it means to confess Jesus as the Christ.

This is what is involved today in an individual recognizing the authority of Jesus of Nazareth. Now we move on to question (2): How does this fit without common sense?

2. How Do We Justify This Authority?

How can we justify this authority for Jesus of Nazareth in a way consistent with our common sense theology? It fits with our understanding of the Christ, with our conception of God, and with our modern common sense to claim that Jesus of Nazareth was particularly sensitive to the presence of God as the context for our lives and to the possibilities and demands that this creates for us. If we use the image of God as magnetic field, then we can similarly picture Jesus as a compass. A compass is not made of the same substance as a magnetic field, nor is it sent

or chosen by the north pole, but it is accurately sensitive to the pull and direction of the magnetic field within which we live.

It is well known that some other animals can sense color and smell and sound beyond our range. Bees home in on brilliant ultraviolet patterns that we see as plain white daisies; pigeons can literally align themselves to magnetic north because of magnetite in their brains. Similarly, we recognize that some people are more sensitive than others to the spiritual dimensions of human existence and that some are particularly sensitive. And this is the claim that we make of Jesus of Nazareth. We claim that he was particularly aware of and in tune with God, that he was aware of and in tune with the ultimate truths and values and meaning.

We do not have to claim that he is the only person who was ever this sensitive to God, that he was in tune with God in an absolutely unique way. Rather, our claim is that Jesus was particularly sensitive to God. We claim that he was right, that he is an accurate compass. This is sufficient for our faith—that we have a trustworthy guide—and this fits with our common sense in a way that other kinds of claims about Jesus do not.

3. Why Jesus of Nazareth?

If we do not claim an absolutely unique relationship between Jesus and God, then how do we justify recognizing Jesus' authority? Even if it fits with our common sense, how can we justify choosing this person as our compass when there may be others just as accurate?

This is a legitimate and important question. But we need to remember that we do not need to claim that Jesus is the *only* trustworthy guide to God. I hope we are not so insecure that we need to claim that everyone else in all other religious traditions is hopelessly misguided. As we pointed out in Chapter 8, we can consider each other to be wrong without necessarily impugning the validity of the other's religious beliefs, *if* their beliefs lead to right relation with God and people. And indeed, should we not rejoice if others find themselves directed to truth and to God, even if it is by other paths than our own?

Well, if we don't claim (and so don't need to try to prove) uniqueness for Jesus of Nazareth, how then do we justify giving him the role and authority of compass? There are four parts to our answer: (A) we are not aware of any equally good alternatives; (B) Jesus has been confirmed in this role by many faithful lives; (C) our interpretation of Jesus' role is subject to the correction of tradition and ongoing public discussion; and (D) in the end, it depends on the response of our hearts. You will note that these are mostly reasons of historical accident, dependent on our own historical situation. We are historical creatures, influenced greatly by our circumstances. Our claim is that—partly because of these circumstances—Jesus can function as the Christ for us, and does function this way for those who choose him.

(A) Why choose Jesus of Nazareth when there may be others who were as sensitive to God? The plain fact is that we don't *know* of any others who would fill the bill for us. The other people of whom I am aware who show in their lives this same sensitivity and devotion to the cause of God and rightness are themselves acknowledged followers of Jesus. If we were to choose one of them as a guide we would find ourselves directed right back to Jesus as compass. The one exception to this with which we in the West are familiar is Mahatma Gandhi. However, it is unlikely that we could bridge the cultural gap and choose as compass someone who was an ascetic and a vegetarian and who promoted celibacy even in marriage for the sake of spiritual growth.

Now I freely admit that my not being aware of good alternatives to Jesus of Nazareth may be due to simple ignorance on my part and is no doubt culturally conditioned. Nevertheless, it makes no sense to withhold our allegiance from Jesus merely because it is possible that there may be other options, if in fact there are no actual viable alternatives in sight. (And I must say, even with the honey-wagon load of self-proclaimed saviors now in evidence, there has never been a greater and more obvious dearth of good candidates.)

(B) If we were to become aware of another individual, or even several people, who seem to point to God and to the deepest truths as consistently and accurately as Jesus of Nazareth, we would still have another question. What kind of confirmation is there for the ability of these individuals to serve as accurate guides in aligning our lives with God?

The fact is that the teachings and example of Jesus have been tested out in many lives over many years. It is painfully true that his principles have been tested out by only a small fraction of those who have called themselves Christians through the centuries. But we do have numerous examples of people who, orienting their lives by the Christ, have lived in right relation with their neighbors and God, displaying unselfish caring for the hurts and needs of others.

This is very mundane historical fact. But the fact of the matter is that Jesus' ability to function as a compass has been tested and confirmed over many generations. It is unlikely that we will find an alternative with this kind of confirmation, in whom we can have the same level of confidence.

(C) We need also to consider the fact that the content and implications of Jesus' message are the subject of ongoing public discussion and debate. The importance of this must not be underestimated. When someone chooses to follow this particular compass they have as a resource an existing institution—the Church—to provide support and encouragement as well as the challenge and reminder of what it means to live in this direction. Who among us does not need this encouragement from time to time?