

PART TWO

TRADITIONAL DOCTRINE

In Part Two we assess the adequacy of traditional Christian doctrine about the resurrection, the divinity of Jesus and the identity of Jesus. We also examine the relationship between faith and doctrine.

In Chapter Five we conclude that we do have a good general idea as to what Jesus said, and we proceed from this to develop two rules of Christian belief to identify when a belief is appropriate for Christians and when a belief may be required of Christians.

In Chapter Six we look at the resurrection and conclude that indeed some special experience took place, but that the resurrection does not have religious significance for us.

In Chapter Seven we consider the question of Jesus' divinity. This doctrine is not Biblical, is logically impossible (as opposed to a paradox), violates our common sense, and is unnecessary and even unhelpful.

In Chapter Eight we pause to highlight the distinction between faith and doctrine. Faith is the way we live our lives, doctrine is the intellectual explanation of this, so one may have a valid Christian belief that is not factually accurate if this belief leads one into right relationship.

In Chapter Nine we continue our consideration of traditional themes by examining the titles used to answer the question "Who is Jesus of Nazareth?" Looking at traditional

titles such as "Savior", "Lord and Master", "Son of God" and "Messiah", we find none of them satisfactory. I then explain briefly what I mean by Jesus as "the Christ" understood in a functional way. This leads us into Part Three, my proposal for a common sense and faithful alternative to traditional orthodoxy.

CHAPTER 5: CAN THIS BE CHRISTIAN?

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my father who is in heaven.”
(Matthew 7:21)

At this point it seems necessary to pause for an important question. Is it possible to proclaim that the Bible is not perfect, that God does not act in the physical events of this world, and that miracles are religiously insignificant—and still be Christian?

In this chapter we are going to go through several steps that will give us two general rules about Christian belief. These rules are very simple but very important. The first rule will tell us when a belief may be considered Christian. The second will state when a belief may be *required* of Christians.

Part of what we are asking here is what it means to be a Christian. This is a very basic question. To whom do we look for an answer? More important than what Luther or Augustine said, more important than what your pastor or the Pope or Billy Graham said, more important than what your family told you or what your fundamentalist or atheistic neighbor told you—what did Jesus of Nazareth say?

In step one we will examine the question of whether in fact we know what Jesus said. It is necessary that we face this question up front. In step two we will consider the main thrust of Jesus’ message. In step three we will draw some conclusions about Christian belief and formulate our two rules.

Step One: Do We Know What Jesus Said?

We must begin by admitting that there is some serious question as to what Jesus *did* say. Whole books continue to be written just on this topic. While some people may think that the red print in their New Testament represents words taken down by stenographers as Jesus spoke, the fact is that the Gospels as we have them were written somewhere from thirty to sixty years after his death. Matthew and Luke both make

use of an earlier written record of Jesus' teachings, but we do not know when or by whom this document was written. (It is called the "Q Source", from the German word for source, "quelle".) There is also the fact that each of the four Gospel writers has a somewhat differing interpretation of Jesus, and so each puts a different slant on things. On top of this, Jesus is sometimes quoted as saying things that reflect a little too neatly the needs of the early Church. To give just three examples, there would seem to be legitimate doubts about such passages as John the Baptist's recognition of Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus saying to Peter "on this rock I will build my church," and Jesus' very specific predictions of his death and resurrection. We will take a brief look at each of these to show why.

The story of John the Baptist is found early in all four Gospels. While it does not concern a statement by Jesus, it is a good illustration of the problem at hand. There is no question that Jesus was baptized by John. Jesus' disciples would never have made this up, because it was an embarrassment to them. It was embarrassing because he who baptizes generally has greater authority than he who is baptized, and they had to admit that Jesus was baptized by John, not the other way around. No doubt they were reminded of this by the disciples of the Baptist.

So here was a need of Jesus' early followers: to show that Jesus was the Messiah even though he himself was baptized by another man. They knew that John had said that "he who is coming is mightier than I," and they were convinced that Jesus was this person. And since John the Baptist was a prophet, he must have known who Jesus was, too. So wouldn't it make sense to make this clear by having John say so himself? Thus we have the words attributed to him in Matthew 3:14 and John 1:29-34 (e.g., "This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, for he was before me.' " John 1:30).

But if John knew that Jesus was this person when he baptized him, why did he later on send messengers to ask Jesus, "Are you he who is to come?" (Matthew 11; Luke 7) It doesn't make sense. And the earlier statements attributed to John are just too convenient to believe.

The second example we're looking at is Matthew 16:18, where Jesus says to Simon, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church," in response to Peter's recognition of him as the Christ. We can safely assume that some such incident occurred which caused Jesus to confer upon Simon the name of Peter, or rock. But there is no evidence at all that Jesus had any intention of starting "my church". On the contrary, he was calling Jews back to their God, teaching in the synagogues and the Temple.

Again, however, the early Christians had a need. They had been kicked out of the synagogues and sought justification for the founding of a separate Church. They needed Jesus' authority for it. No doubt Jesus said something about Peter and his other disciples which was later on remembered in this way. But this verse fits the need of the early Church

too neatly, while at the same time *not* fitting with what else we know about Jesus, for us not to be skeptical about it.

The third example consists of the very specific predictions that Jesus made of his own death and resurrection. For instance, Matthew 20:18–19: “Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the son of man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and deliver him to the Gentiles to be mocked and scourged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day.”

There are several reasons to doubt whether this is an actual statement of Jesus. First of all, it’s just too precise not to suspect the work of someone who knew exactly how things did, in fact, turn out. Secondly, the disciples give no evidence in their reactions to Jesus’ arrest and execution of having ever heard him say this. And thirdly, the early Church had a vested interest here. Crucifixion was an ignominious death meted out to enemies of the state. For this death to make sense to them it had to be seen as part of a divine plan, and as voluntary and intentional on Jesus’ part. What better way to show this than by his own predictions of it?

Surely Jesus foresaw danger and possible death in Jerusalem, and surely his disciples would later have read more into any forebodings. “Now we understand what he meant! He was predicting his crucifixion.” It would be only natural that by the time it was incorporated in the Gospels a general warning by Jesus had become a very specific prediction of what his disciples knew came to pass.

We have looked at these as examples of specific passages that reasonable people could reasonably doubt the historical accuracy of. There is certainly sufficient reason to believe that the collection of Jesus’ sayings presented in the Gospels is not completely accurate. Some scholars, however, have taken this to the extreme. Citing specific examples and the passage of years before the Gospels were written, and the influence of authors, editors, and the early Church, they make themselves opposite counterparts to the Biblical literalists. They appear to follow the rule that if you can’t believe all of it, then doubt all of it. It has even been claimed that there is not a single complete sentence that we can be positive was uttered by Jesus of Nazareth.

But this is not very sensible. What may be a good reason to doubt a given verse or set of verses is not necessarily good reason to doubt whole chapters. To doubt for no good reason is as silly as believing for no good reason.

The fact is that the Gospels are not disconnected stories and sayings that could have been chosen at random here and there. The accounts we have of the ministry and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth fit together in a coherent way to portray a remarkable and insightful individual.

It is true that we do not know the precise date of the Gospels or the precise nature of their sources. It is true that it seems likely that Mark, the earliest of them, was written some three decades after Jesus’ death.

But we have learned much about the strength of oral tradition in other societies, and how it can convey surprisingly accurate information over years and sometimes even generations. And in the case of the Gospels we are dealing with a time period well within individual lifespans. So while we cannot claim that the Gospels have the accuracy of video tape, and we cannot doubt that there are some errors due to oral transmission, there is also no reason to doubt that they contain a generally accurate picture of a man who made a very strong impression on his contemporaries.

So it is, too, with the influence of the early Church on the Gospels. Certainly there was some impact. And a prudent person can reasonably doubt those sayings which so precisely fit the needs of Jesus' early followers, which do *not* fit with the rest of his message. But this does not give us any reason to doubt all the rest of Jesus' sayings and actions.

We need to keep in mind what the question is. The question is not whether we have a precise record of exactly what Jesus did, and when and where and how he did it. For the most part we do not have all this. The question is, do we have an accurate representation of the kind of things that Jesus did, of the kind of life he lived, and of the main events in it?

And the question is not whether we have Jesus' sayings in the exact words he uttered. There is no way of knowing this, and it doesn't much matter. The question is, do we have the faithfully remembered ideas of this man who made such an impression on those who heard him? And the question is not whether we have his ideas rendered exactly right on every single issue addressed in the Gospels. The question is, do we have a coherent and accurate statement of his central message?

Yes, we do. An unbiased look at the overall picture makes it impossible to conclude otherwise. With what we now know about oral tradition we cannot use the time lapse before the Gospels were written to cast doubt on their general accuracy, even as we cannot guarantee their accuracy in every detail. We have a generally consistent account about an exceptional individual who had a great impact on his contemporaries. If it was not Jesus of Nazareth who taught these teachings and through his life and death gave impetus to this movement, if it was not this Jesus of Nazareth who was revered by the early Church as it passed on his precepts—within the lifespan of those who knew him—then who was it? Does it make sense to invent another person here when all the testimony points to Jesus, and when the Gospels paint a coherent picture of a man who lived and taught his powerful understanding of the love of God? Of course not. The only reasonable conclusion is that we do have a generally accurate picture of the way Jesus lived and of his central message.¹

¹If one wishes a more detailed study of the question, one can read Schillebeeckx's *Jesus*, in which it takes him 437 pages to come to this point: "All in all, we are led to conclude that

The Exception: The Gospel of John

So: we have a generally accurate representation of the life and the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. In essence, we are saying that unless you can give a good reason to doubt a particular passage, there is no reason to doubt it. With this guideline we can be generally satisfied with the vast majority of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. These three have much in common, and in fact are collectively called “the Synoptics” because of their similarity.

The Gospel of John is different. Jesus talks differently in John than in the Synoptics. This is apparent even in the English translation. He speaks in a very stylized manner, he uses different concepts than in the other Gospels, and in places he is almost overloaded with symbols like the “bread of life” and “light of the world”. It is apparent on even a cursory reading that something has happened here to the sayings of Jesus.

With some study, it is evident that John’s Gospel is the end product of significant theological thought. John has done more “theologizing” than the other three Gospels together. This doesn’t mean that what John says is necessarily wrong or necessarily right. But it does mean that what he quotes Jesus as saying has been filtered through a particular process, much more so than in the Synoptics. In effect, what we have here is Jesus quoted as saying what John thought Jesus meant to say. Maybe the intent is the same as what Jesus actually said, and maybe it isn’t. In either case, Jesus’ words here are definitely restructured by John’s theology.

What this means, of course, is that there is good reason to be more skeptical of what Jesus says in the Gospel of John. One must look at whether particular sayings are consistent with his teachings as we know them from the Synoptics. One must also look out a little more carefully than in the other three Gospels for the influence of the early Church and of the author’s own theology.

Step Two: What Did Jesus Say?

We began this chapter with the question of what it means to be a Christian and decided that we must begin with what Jesus said. We asked first of all whether we know what Jesus said. In step one we concluded that while there are particular reasons for doubting particular passages, we have a generally accurate representation of Jesus’ actions and (in Matthew, Mark and Luke) of his teachings. In other words, yes,

the New Testament, not in spite of the diverse kerygmatic projects but because of them, gives substantial information about Jesus of Nazareth.” (Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus* [Crossroad Publishing Co., 1979.] p. 437)

we do know well enough what Jesus said. Now in step two we will consider the question of what Jesus said it meant to be a Christian.

Of course Jesus never answered this question directly. In fact, he never said anything about "Christian" at all. In the first place, Jesus was intent upon reforming Judaism, not starting a new religion. In the second place, this name was not given to his followers until some years after his death.

So we will ask a different question: what does it mean to be a follower of Jesus of Nazareth? But this is not really a different question. This is just another way of asking the same thing, for if it means anything to be a Christian it means to be a follower of Jesus the Christ.

What did Jesus ask of his followers? What did he call people to do? What response did he seek to himself and his message?

There are three passages in the Gospels which serve as particularly good summaries of Jesus' teachings, though each in a different way. Each of them gets to the heart of the matter in a way that rings of authenticity. They are: the Great Commandment, the Sermon on the Mount, and the Great Judgment.²

I. The Great Commandment

And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question, to test him. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" And he [Jesus] said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets. (Matthew 22:35-40)

This passage is found with slight variations in Mark and Luke (Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-28). Incidentally, it's a good example of the kind of differences between Gospels that is *not* important. In Mark it is a scribe that asks the question, not a lawyer, and Jesus' phrasing is slightly

²It is widely accepted that central to Jesus' message was "the Kingdom of God". I have avoided the use of this phrase here for two reasons: (1) The popular understandings of this phrase range from perfection on earth, to heaven, to the millennial rule of Christ after the Second Coming, all of which serve to confuse the issue at question here. (2) For most of this century it was assumed by scholars that Jesus' references to the Kingdom of God referred to a future eschatological event: an imminent end to the world as we know it. But the scholarly consensus is now trending to the opposite viewpoint: Jesus did not preach the end of the world, and those passages which clearly refer to a Second Coming or end of the world are the creation of the early Church. (See Marcus J. Borg, "Jesus and the Kingdom of the God", in *The Christian Century*, April 22, 1987, p. 378-380.)

Therefore, for Jesus, the Kingdom of God is concerned with a life lived now in response to God, in the presence of God. However, because of all the unhelpful connotations of the traditional phrase, the substance of this kind of life is better addressed by examining Jesus' central themes as we do here, and in an expanded way in Chapter 16, rather than by using the phrase "Kingdom of God".