

What is Essential in the Christian Religion?

THE JESUS OF HISTORY AND THE CHURCH

By

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I. Introduction.

The ways and means of seeking to know about Jesus and his relation to the Christian church have been many and varied. Even when scholars have attempted to make use of historical method, they have not been entirely free from bias. The variety which exists in the theories of competent scholars illustrates the difficulty and relativity of study in this particular field. For one who claims neither special knowledge nor proper preparation, the only justification for this effort is that we all must seek to know about the origins of the great tradition which we have inherited.

The method must be what is vaguely defined as the historical method. By this, I mean that all sources are to be sifted and evaluated in as unprejudiced a manner as possible. The sources are admittedly difficult to handle, and the variety of views at the very beginning of the search is such as to cast aspersions on any conclusions which may be reached.

These sources cannot be handled entirely without bias. The method of the modern historical school is a naturalistic one. Every attempt must be made to explain the facts according to norms which can be understood by the natural reason. While the supernatural cannot be thrown out, it cannot be postulated as the efficient cause of particular events.

Whatever persuasion the conclusions of this paper may have must rest on the value of the authorities quoted, and not on any personal expertness.

II. Sources.

The non-Christian sources have little value. The more radical scholars eliminate them entirely. At their best, all they do is corroborate the fact of the historicity of Jesus, without providing any details.

Most scholars also feel that outside the synoptic gospels there is little that does more than establish the existence of Jesus. A careful and critical use of the synoptic gospels, especially the essence of Mark and "Q", provides the primary data. The rest of the New Testament, especially Acts, is instructive as it indicates how the church evolved from the eschatological views and messianic hopes of the disciples.

While the source material is very slight, the real difficulty lies in the preconceived ideas, theological biases, and modern way of thinking of contemporary scholarship.

However, not only are there the prejudices of our own minds. Cadbury reminds us that the process of "modernizing" Jesus began when the first words were written about him.¹ We must remember that even the synoptics were written from the point of view of the primitive church. They are not primarily history, they are interpretations aimed to convert mankind to the "good news" of Christianity. They see Jesus

1. Peril of Modernizing Jesus, p. 17.

through the eyes of the church, in the light of theological development, and through the dynamic resurrection experiences of the early apostles. While they have the outlook of the first century Jewish mind, they express a point of view quite removed from that of Jesus of Nazareth. (1) It is a messianic interpretation, but does not quite eliminate a more primitive view. (2) There is a foretelling of Jesus' death and resurrection. (3) The church is taken for granted. (4) There is a confusion of the eschatology of Jesus and that of the primitive church. These considerations make accurate use of the sources difficult.

III. Life of Jesus.

A. Backgrounds.

We do know a little of Jesus' religious environment. He inherited the great tradition of the Jewish religion. This meant knowledge of the greatness, glory, and goodness of Yahweh, of whom the Jews were the chosen people. Tied in with this was the expectation of the end of the age. This hope turned in two directions: (1) the arrival of a political messiah, where Yahweh would aid in overcoming the enemy; and (2) the intervention of Yahweh himself through means of a supernatural messiah. These two schools of thought ranged side by side. The latter is further developed by the influence of Persian dualism. Another variant depends on whether the kingdom will come on earth, or in heaven.

Furthermore, Jesus inherited the practices of the synagogue, the duties of the law, and the ethical demands of prophetic religion. Add to this great heritage the ability of a sensitive spirit to delve more deeply into reality than other men, and we have the background of Jesus' teaching, and mission.²

B. Ministry.

It is generally agreed that we know nothing of Jesus until his appearance at the time of his baptism. He was probably born in Nazareth, 4-6 B.C., of simple Galilean parents.

From the time of its inception, Jesus' ministry and following must have moved at a rapid pace. Few scholars today accept the Johannean chronology, and some do not accept Mark. But the events recorded in Mark could have occurred in from six weeks to a year. We may estimate that Jesus began his ministry in 28 A.D., and was crucified in the spring of 29. During this time, he gathered about him a small band of followers and wandered all over Galilee, teaching and preaching, and perhaps performing some miracles. It is hard to determine how successful he was. The hope of the people for some type of messiah might have drawn many to him, but it is equally probable that the number of his listeners has been magnified by the growth of tradition. Even if the Palm Sunday story is taken as authentic, the fact that people hailed him would not indicate that they were his followers.

2. E. W. Parsons, Religion of the New Testament (Harper), pp. 8-13.

C. Purpose.

If Jesus' career moved with the swiftness indicated by the brevity of his teaching ministry, he must have been motivated by a main purpose. The central theme is the announcement of the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God. It is entirely possible that when Jesus took his disciples to Jerusalem, he expected the coming to be consummated at that particular passover. He did not go there because he expected to be put to death, but because his burning hope was to be realized. The text of Luke supports this thesis:

And when the hour was come, he sat down with the apostles. And he said unto them, Greatly have I desired to eat this passover with you (before I suffer(?)): for I say unto you, I shall not eat it, until it find fulfillment in the kingdom of God. And receiving a cup, he gave thanks, and he said, Take this, and divide it among yourselves: for I say unto you, I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine, until the kingdom of God shall come. (22:14-18).

Parsons writes, "Jesus was not contemplating any long abstinence from food or drink, but ... his soul was swept with conviction of the utter imminence of the kingdom."³

There is more and more doubt among scholars as to whether Jesus ever conceived of himself as messiah. As we know, "messiah" applied to two viewpoints, political and eschatological. Jesus explicitly rejected the former, and his references to the latter (in spite of careful editing) still appear as referring to another. As Enslin writes, "It is one thing for a first-century Jew to have expected a figure soon to appear; a totally different thing for him to believe that he himself would be miraculously transformed from a flesh-and-blood man into this figure. With all allowances made, it is hard to conceive how such a view could have been held except at the expense of mental sanity."⁴

If Jesus never claimed to be a political or eschatological messiah, there are still two alternatives: (1) he may have established himself as a suffering servant, or (2) he may have been simply a prophet. It seems more likely, however, that the concept of Jesus as a suffering servant arose to explain the crucifixion, which Jesus did not anticipate at least until the very last moment. Quotes from Isaiah do not invalidate this.

The problem cannot be easily solved; but the solution that offers the least difficulties is that Jesus believed he was called by God to a special mission: the pronouncement of the imminence of the kingdom, and the means for entering therein. The center of Jesus' religion was never himself; it was the kingdom, and his call was for repentance before it was too late.

D. Teachings.

The teachings of Jesus can best be understood in light of his Jewish heritage. It would be a mistake to say that Jesus made no contributions to this tradition, but

³. Op. cit. p. 15.

⁴. Christian Beginnings, p. 163; Cf. Guignobert, Jesus, pp. 285-286.

it is unwise to claim originality unless it can be substantiated.

(1) We cannot escape the eschatological framework of his teachings. He really believed that the kingdom was soon to appear. So one must repent and be ready for the act of God which was to come. This was Jesus' earliest message and his constant one. Except by reading the synoptics through the eyes of the Fourth Gospel, we cannot establish any "spiritual" kingdom.

(2) Jesus' call to repentance is based upon his conviction concerning the kingdom. The precondition to entrance into the kingdom is repentance; for God is not only the sovereign master and judge, he is also the Father who has a sense of love and tenderness. Jesus is typically prophetic in making the prerequisite to membership in the kingdom a moral rather than a national one. He talked about the lost sheep of Israel, but there is nothing in his message that explicitly rejects the Gentiles, and the words are ascribed to him that we must be superior to the Scribes and Pharisees.

While Jesus remained within his tradition even in his ethical emphasis, it is this which remains distinctive. The implications of his ethic could not be held within national bounds, and they have taken on a universal form of appeal which has been self-validating through the ages.

Furthermore, the ethical quality of repentance purifies the concept of God. The moral and spiritual relationship, which, Jesus taught, can exist between the individual and God takes precedence over the conventional and covenantal relationships of the immediate environment.

(3) In Jesus' ethics, it is his view of man which stands out. (i) He seems to have a higher regard for persons and their potentialities than many of his later followers. He was aware of the sinful aspects of man's nature, but he never taught that men were inherently sinful. He saw the same potentialities for becoming sons of God in the Pharisees and the publicans. The tragedy of sin is that it dams up potentialities. Without dimming his eyes to sin, he yet held out the hope of salvation to all men.

(ii) The constant factor in Jesus' ethics lies in one's intention or attitude. Once man's intentions were right, he could be counted on to make external conditions correct. There is a relativity about the values to be sought, and the ends attained may not be of equal worth, but men are judged by their attitudes.

(iii) Salvation, then, does not depend on any transactional scheme of redemption, but on what one does about his own sins. The idea of a sacrificial redemption developed later as an explanation of the events of the crucifixion. Jesus' idea of salvation is probably best expressed in the story of the Prodigal Son. After his thoughts and emotions of regret, he says, "I will rise up, and go to my father." And when he turns toward the father, the father goes running to meet him. It is a reciprocal relationship, not a transactional one.

(iv) Jesus seems to have selected the highest and best from his ethical heritage and environment. While no such discourse as the Sermon on the Mount was ever delivered, it is probable that except for the literary form and certain embellishments it is representative of the religious ethics of Jesus. What we find here are moral attitudes, rather than principles or norms. And these attitudes are sound no matter how in error Jesus may have been about the kingdom.

(v) The motives behind Jesus' teachings are not simply those of altruism. Jesus appealed to the motives of fear and reward. In the Beatitudes, the poor, meek, peace-makers, and others are happy because of what is going to happen to them. They are not happy now. McCown tells us that what Jesus meant is "that when the will of the loving heavenly Father was done on earth as it is in heaven, there would be neither wealth nor poverty, neither gluttony nor hunger, neither selfish mirth nor inconsolable sorrow."⁵ It is only when enough men have repented and accepted the attitudes toward God and man which are the will of God, that the kingdom will be established.

(vi) When the attempt is made to apply the attitudes stressed by Jesus to a specific situation, it must be remembered that Jesus faced a world very different from ours, and his attitudes may involve different conclusions for us than those ascribed to Jesus. A good example of this is the problem of war.

It is interesting to note that Jesus never said, "blessed are the pacifists," but "blessed are the peace-makers." Here Jesus is stressing an attitude rather than a policy. Pacifism is merely one means of peace-making, and it must be examined on its own merits to determine if it is the best one.

We sometimes forget that Jesus lived in a world which was constantly at war. The people were looking for a messiah to free them from Rome by military might. While the Sadducees were in favor of appeasement, the Zealots wanted a fight; and the Pharisees held out the hope of supernatural aid. Palestine was a center of seething emotions. Jesus had to meet this situation, and he taught that we cannot use the wiles of the Devil to beat the Devil. Peace-making and forgiveness are part of the same attitude.

There are two factors in Jesus' situation which are different from ours.

- (1) As a member of a minority group, there was little chance of military success.
- (2) There was the hope that God would intervene. Today, powerful democracies are strong enough to save the world. They have already done it once, without unqualified success. We are sure there will be no supernatural intervention.

While these factors throw open the question to new interpretation, it seems to me that the attitude of Jesus, as a peace-maker, dictates an answer to our present problem other than that of war. We know that wars breed more wars. If we are to be peace-makers, we are deceiving ourselves when we put our trust in a method which always has failed.

Peace upon earth was said; we sing it,
And pay a million priests to bring it.
After two thousand years of mass,
We've got as far as poison gas.

E. Death and Resurrection.

There is probably an historical core in the story of Holy Week, but the obvious coloring of the sources by the point of view of the early church makes any definite statement doubtful. Guignebert doubts practically all the events, except that "Jesus was arrested by the Roman police, judged and condemned by the Roman procurator, Pilate or someone else."⁶ It was necessary to get rid of this messianic preacher in order to keep the peace, and so Jesus was not defended against what was probably trumped-up evidence.

After the crucifixion, the stories presented in the gospels are inconsistent.

5. Christendom, 1:799; Cf. Macintosh, Social Religion, pp. 39ff.

6. Op. cit., p. 468.

The burial, resurrection, and ascension must be considered together. These legends were inevitable. Major tells us, "The belief in the Resurrection of Jesus was created not by an objective experience of His disciples after His crucifixion, but by a subjective experience created by the impact of His personality upon their personalities in the preceding period."⁷ This experience of Jesus revitalized the broken little group, and they returned to Jerusalem in joy and confidence that he would return again as a supernatural messiah.

IV. THE CHURCH.

A. Jesus and the Church.

I believe it is amply verified that Jesus did not intend to found a church. He neither foresaw nor desired the institution which bears his name. It was the resurrection experience, probably of Peter, which grew like wildfire, which started the Jewish sect which later became the church. As Loisy has said, "What Jesus announced was the Kingdom of God; what came was the Catholic Church."⁸ But that process did not take place immediately. The little band of Jewish-Christians in Jerusalem continued to worship with their fellow Jews, and the only difference, howbeit an important one, was their attitude toward Jesus, the risen Christ, whom they now believed to be the messiah.

The central point in the founding of the church is not Jesus. His life and teachings in themselves might never have resulted in a church, except for the resurrection. The little, enthusiastic group, basing its teachings probably on the sermon of Peter (Acts 10:34-43), soon had a large following. Not only Greek-speaking Jews but Greek pagans soon joined this group, which had become bilingual. It inherited the Septuagint.⁹

From the very beginning Christianity was a mystery-cult in its own right,¹⁰ for in the words of Peter, "through his name everyone who believes on him shall receive remission of sins." (Acts 10:43). This group became the "new Israel", and not until Paul's Gentile group became powerful was there any conflict as to whether they belonged to Judaism. Through Paul's vigorous influence, Christianity became a church which could not stay within Judaism, and it became a real rival for the flourishing mystery-cults of the Mediterranean world.¹¹

B. Paul and the Church.

There are many agreements between the teachings of Paul and Jesus. Both believed in the imminent coming of the kingdom and interpreted it messianically. Both stressed the inner motive of moral repentance as a pre-condition to entering the kingdom. Both had faith in the same kind of a God.

But there are important differences, so much so that it has been said that "the conversion of Saul of Tarsus meant the birth of a new religion."¹² (1) Paul talks about a transactional scheme of redemption which is entirely foreign to the thought of Jesus. In spite of Paul's teaching about freedom from the law, his penal, sacrificial doctrine of redemption is legalistic -- so much so that followers of Paul have been able to transform his ethics so completely that Christian thought becomes dissociated from the ethical salvation of Jesus.

(2) Jesus held a much higher view of man than Paul, especially as the latter's

7. Mission and Message of Jesus, p. 217.

8. Quoted by Grant, Anglican Theological Review, 21:191.

9. Cf. Riddle, Journal of Religion, 19:338; Filson, Anglican Theolog. Review, 21:181.

10. Cf. Grant, op. cit., 21:194.

11. McGiffert, Christianity as History and Faith, pp. 17ff.

12. Loc. cit.

thought is reflected in the early chapters of Romans. Paul's man is almost hopeless, predestined to his end, and saved only by God's merciful transaction. It has been said that Paul's doctrine of grace is more inclusive. I believe it is because of the difference in the doctrines of man. For Jesus, man can arise of his own accord before God's grace becomes active. God has endowed man with sufficient spiritual motive power to make his own decisions, but he still needs God. For Paul, man needs God's grace in order to turn to God at all, because God has not previously given the power to man to make choices in moral and spiritual matters.

(3) Paul's thought is mystical, while that of Jesus is prophetic. Paul feels the spirit of Christ working through him, and he is submissive. Jesus seems to move under his own motive power, although he is conscious of a close relationship with God.

(4) There is a sacramental strain in Paul, which he inherited from both his Jewish-Christian and Hellenistic environments. It was Paul who interpreted Christianity in such a way that it won out over the other mystery cults.

(5) Both Paul and Jesus were rigidly monotheistic, but for Paul the human Jesus is unimportant, and Christ, the son of God becomes central.¹³

Concerning these points, Parsons writes: "It is interesting to note that the matters in Pauline thought and religion upon which Christianity in general, and Protestantism in particular, have laid chief emphasis are those in which he differs from Jesus....It is not fortunate that friends of Paul have laid so much emphasis upon features of his religion that are essentially transient. Some of his christology, his limitation of salvation to those in the community, his somewhat rigid doctrine of election, his thought of marriage, those are so closely allied to his inheritance and immediate situation that they could not have persistent application."¹⁴

Paul, in a very real sense, was the first churchman.¹⁵ Not only have his teachings influenced the church more than that of any other person, except possibly Jesus, but it was Paul's power of organization which established the church and held it together as a more than Jewish religious body. It was Paul who determined the origins of Christian orthodoxy, not Jesus. Even if this be true, however, we must not underestimate the importance of other primitive Christians, known and unknown, who made real contributions. Paul was merely the headliner, who soon overshadowed Peter, James, and others. His influence has been more permanent, perhaps too much so, because of his writings; but in the earliest days men like Stephen made just as great contributions to the growing enthusiasm for their small sect.

C. The Church and Judaism.

While it can be said with some assurance that Jesus did not intend to found a church, and while Paul and some of the earlier disciples had much more to do with its development, it is equally true that without Jesus there would be no church. Implicit in the life and work of Jesus (unless it had been lost to the world entirely) was the necessity for breaking away from Judaism, and for the developing of a new tradition.

While Jesus was a typical Jew, there was much of prophetic radicalism in his teachings and living which could not be palatable to the orthodox Jews (or the

13. Cf. Parsons, *op. cit.*, pp. 112-116.

14. *Op. cit.*, pp. 116-118.

15. Cf. Bernardin, Anglican Theological Review, p. 159.

orthodox anywhere). We might mention a few items: he rejected fasting; he broke the laws of the Sabbath at a time when there was general rigid observance; he ignored the food laws, thus striking at the very heart of the Mosaic distinction between clean and unclean foods; he always placed human need above formalism, even when there was no particular reason for it; he carried the concept of a loving God to the point where God seeks his erring sons, whether they pay attention to ceremonial law or not; he insisted that there would be an uncomfortably recent fulfillment of the messianic hopes. There seems to be an authority in Jesus' teachings and healing which imperiled the sanctions of the organized groups.¹⁶

So while Jesus never consciously broke with Judaism, and usually observed its forms, his radicalism not only brought about emity but made it necessary that sooner or later any movement bearing his name should be declared anathema. With this as a background, and with the universal appeal that was implicit in his message, it was not long before the little Jewish Christian group found itself outside the pale.

D. The Church to the Year 100 A.D.

Jewish opposition to the Christians grew rapidly, and this is already reflected in the gospels themselves. By the time of the Fourth Gospel, Christianity was a small group struggling for existence. This unknown writer sees the church as a spiritual fellowship, withdrawn from the world, working under the guidance of the supernatural and mystical Logos-Christ. Even the love expressed in the gospel is limited to the fellowship.¹⁷

The development of the early church was full of variety, especially at the beginning, and it would be impossible to trace the many trends even as far as they have been reconstructed by modern scholarship. But there is a unity about the early church which is surprising. There was room for difference of opinion on all subjects, provided that one believed Jesus was the Christ.

There are certain developments which may be mentioned: the ministry, the sacraments, early worship, and communism.

(1) Concerning the ministry, we know that the earliest leaders were called "apostles," but the term probably has no distinctive meaning, unless they were witnesses to the resurrection, as Paul was. From these men grew a diversity of overlapping offices: "apostles, prophets, teachers, evangelists, workers of miracles, healers, shepherds, rulers, bishops, deacons."¹⁸ Gradually, out of the confusion came some semblance of order. About the beginning of the second century this movement got under way, eventuating in "one main type which centered in the Presbyter-Bishop, or in the Bishop with his council of elders."¹⁹ "But there were still churches in the second century which were governed by Elders, and perhaps even some headed by prophets (if we take the Didache into account)."²⁰

(2) There were two sacraments from the earliest time. It is hard to know when baptism became an accepted rite. Jesus did not baptize, and Paul looked askance at it. But it probably went back to "the baptism which John preached" (Acts 10:37) and the tradition that Jesus was baptized by John, but that is all we know of its origin.

While the earliest traditions of the Last Supper seem to indicate messianic expectation, and the earliest practices were fellowship meals, it developed under

16. Cf. Filson, Anglican Theological Review, 21:174-177.
17. Cf. Parsons, op. cit., pp. 222-225.
18. Grant, op. cit., 21:196.
19. Loc. cit.
20. Ibid., p. 197.

Paul's instruction into a memorial of Christ's death. By the time Mark was written, the Pauline influence of I Cor. 11:17-34 may have been the dominant one. It is likely that the Lukan form (22:14-18) is the more primitive, and this view is supported in Acts (2:42, 46; 20:7, 11; 27:35) partially in Mark (14:25) and Matthew (26:29), and in the practice of the Corinthian church before Paul was forced to change the emphasis.²¹ The meal was repeated regularly, and soon included the sense of fellowship with the risen Christ. Sometime after Paul, the agape and communion were separated.²²

(3) The earliest worship of the Jerusalem church was a continuation of its regular Jewish practices in temple and synagogue, supplemented by private meetings for the Supper, prayer, and reading of Scripture. The Gentile church was cut off from its Jewish relations from the beginning, and met only in private houses or secluded places. There were hymns, and the teaching of Jesus' words, parables, and incidents of his ministry.²³

(4) Grant states simply that the "communism" of the primitive church is a "misnomer." Whatever it was, it was not a theory for solving social problems; it was not compulsory; and anyhow it did not work. There was charity among the brethren, but the social outlook of the early Christians remained other-worldly.²⁴

V. AN EVOLVING CHURCH.

The church of the New Testament is an evolving church, developing on a hit or miss basis and meeting its needs as they appeared. It owes a great deal to its Jewish heritage. Jesus did not found the church, and yet in a very real sense is its founder. The earliest leaders, Apostles or Elders, did not establish a three-fold ministry, or any other. But the three-fold ministry did arise after New Testament times. No matter what Jesus may have said about Peter's being a rock, the fact remains that the church was not founded on him. As Grant writes, the church "is the evolution of a faith, a cult, a body of belief and practice under the guidance of the divine Spirit, but conditioned every step of the way by the human situations which it met -- and mastered."²⁵

The Kingdom of God preached by Jesus of Nazareth still remains the heart of Christianity. The means for entering that kingdom are still the ethical ones of repentance -- and doing something about it. The channel of God's grace is still primarily (not exclusively) the Christian church, and that church must continue to evolve.

While the New Testament is the product of the church, it is also the record of the church, and is therefore more fundamental in providing direction than the church itself. It is the New Testament which provides the perspective, which establishes the direction, and indicates the diversity in unity which is essential to a truly Christlike church. And the New Testament can only be understood in the light of its Jewish heritage.

But any study of the synoptic gospels calls us back to something which is fundamental to our whole religious life. The vital, joyous, and tragic religion of Jesus himself, smothered, ignored, and almost lost in the bonds of tradition, comes to life again as the energizing power which can raise the church to its former stature, so that it can face the future with a clear vision, a high purpose, and a devotion to the God revealed by Jesus Christ.

21. Parsons, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-30.

22. Grant, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 198.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 201.

25. *Op. cit.*, p. 202.