

# WHAT EVERY CHRISTIAN NEEDS TO KNOW

## Lesson 34

### CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN THEOLOGY

#### Study 2: Christology and Ecclesiology

#### I. Introduction

##### A. Opener

[TEACHERS: Definitions – “Christology”: the study/doctrine of Christ; “Ecclesiology”: the study/doctrine of the Church.]

If, as we saw in the previous study, biblical authority is eroded in the human mind. It logically follows that there will be doubt and confusion regarding its revelation of Jesus Christ.

This, in turn, has had impact on the Church—especially in the West.

The contemporary dilemma is described by conservative Methodist Bishop William H. Willimon:

“Here we are in the North American church—conservative or liberal, evangelical or mainline, Protestant or Catholic, emergent or otherwise—cranking along just fine, thank you. So we’re busy downsizing, becoming culturally relevant, reaching out, drawing in, making disciples, managing the machinery, utilizing biblical principles, celebrating recovery, user-friendly, techno savvy, finding the purposeful life, practicing peace with justice, utilizing spiritual disciplines, growing in self-esteem, reinventing ourselves as successful ecclesiastical entrepreneurs, and, in general, feeling ever so much better about our achievements... Notice anything missing in this pretty picture? *Jesus Christ!* ... God forgive us for selling out our great intellectual treasure—the gospel of God *with us*—for a mass of psychobabble and pragmatic, utilitarian, self-help triviality.”<sup>1</sup>

The early disciples “disbelieved for joy” when they heard about Jesus’ resurrection because it was too good to be true. (Luke 24:41) So today, many still struggle with the staggering claims of the Bible that God visited the world in human form in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and that He personally atoned for our sins, that He rose on the third day, and is seated on the right hand of the Majesty on High, constantly interceding for us. They do not “disbelieve” merely for joy, but because in light of the current level of human knowledge they think the Christ-event to be non-quantifiable, non-measurable, non-verified. Therefore, many struggle to, in the words of Darrell Bock and Daniel Wallace, “dethrone Jesus.”

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Michael Horton, *Christless Christianity*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008, pp.9,11.

**B. Focus—Because the Church is the Body of Christ, cultural confusion with regard to Christology leads to cultural confusion regarding ecclesiology, the nature and doctrine of the Church.**

**II. Information-Background**

**A. The old controversy: The Christ of faith vs. the Jesus of history**

**1. This term was coined in 1892 by Martin Kahler who was attempting to distinguish between the historical Jesus and the Christ Kahler believed the early church described in its writings**

**2. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), whom we met in our last study as the “father of (scientific) theology” “denied that Christianity rested on the historical and doctrinal claims of the New Testament; rather, he insisted that it had only to do with the inward religious consciousness of Jesus.”<sup>2</sup>**

**3. Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) wrote a famous book, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*.**

***a) Schweitzer disagreed with Schleiermacher, who had sought to separate Jesus from Jewish roots. Schweitzer saw Jesus as being caught up in the “rabid apocalypticism of the day.***

***b) Nevertheless, the “Christ of faith” still beckons: “Follow thou Me!”***

**4. The Jesus Seminar continues the effort to distinguish the “Christ of faith” from the “Jesus of History.”**

***a) Under the leadership of Robert W. Funk, John Crossan, and other academics, the Jesus Seminar meets periodically and discusses latest research in their efforts to discover the “real” words of Jesus in distinction from those they believe the church inserted into the Gospels in later periods.***

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<sup>2</sup> “The Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith: Some Contemporary Reflections,” By Richard N. Longenecker, a lecture presented at Yorkminster Park Theological Forum, Toronto, February 11, 1999.

***b) To them, “Jesus was a Cynic-like Jewish charismatic peasant, whose teaching was witty, clever and counter-cultural, but not eschatological and certainly not focused on himself. All portrayals of Jesus of a messianic, sacrificial, redemptive, or eschatological nature in the Gospels (and in the rest of the New Testament) are the products of later church theology, which grew up around the figure of this Mediterranean cynic-like teacher and turned him into a cult figure.”<sup>3</sup>***

**B. Contemporary issues: Current Christological issues revolved around two streams of thought in popular culture:**

- 1. The first is that of traditional Christianity—“Jesus was an authentic representative for and representation of the living God, a figure who stands at the center of a divine plan that reveals the core need for humanity to turn to God and restore a broken relationship with Him on the basis of the provision God has made for that restoration through Jesus Christ.”<sup>4</sup>**
- 2. The second view—and the one that stirs a contemporary Christological crisis—is “Jesusanity.” “In this story, Jesus of Nazareth is important, not any idea tied to the redemptive work of the Christ or a divine salvific plan.”<sup>5</sup>**

### **III. Instruction**

**A. The quest to ‘dethrone’ Jesus**

**1. This idea comes from Darrell L. Bock and Daniel B. Wallace, in their book, *Dethroning Jesus*.**

**2. Christianity vs. ‘Jesusanity’**

***a) Michael Horton reminds us that the “central idea of Christianity is the claim that Jesus is the Anointed One sent from heaven.”<sup>6</sup>***

(1) Ho Christos = “the Anointed one”

(2) Horton: This means “... Jesus serves as a unique bridge between God and humanity, between heaven and earth. No one else is like him. No one else had or ever will have his calling.”

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Darrell L. Bock, Daniel B. Wallace, *Dethroning Jesus*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007, p.216.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Horton, op. cit.

***b) Horton: "Jesusanity" is a coined term for the alternative story about Jesus."***

- Jesus is still "the center of the story, but Jesus as either a prophet or a teacher of religious wisdom. In Jesusanity, Jesus remains very much Jesus of Nazareth. He points the way to God and leads people into a journey with God. His role is primarily one of teacher, guide, and example... There is no enthronement of Jesus at God's side, only the power of his teaching and example."

**3. Horton describes 'many Jesuses' in Jesusanity**

***a) The restoration prophet Jesus:***

Professor EP Sanders wrote a book arguing that Jesus was trying to restore and realign Judaism, which had been Hellenized, to the OT prophets

***b) The counter-cultural Jesus***

*Burton Mack, of Claremont Graduate School, California, believed Jesus was a wandering cynic sage like Socrates "teaching his own form of wisdom and unconventional religious ideas in a manner that irritated the authorities..."*

***c) The 'egalitarian, anti-patriarchal Jesus'***

This was Jesus in the view of Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, a Harvard feminist theologian... Wisdom was Sophia, and therefore a woman, and Jesus was the primary spokesperson of wisdom, and hence a child of the 'divine feminine'

***d) The class warfare Jesus***

Richard Horsely of UMass wrote in 1987 that Jesus was essentially a social revolutionary

***e) The 'spirit person' Jesus***

This is the view held by Jesus scholar Marcus Borg who sees Jesus as "a conduit for the power of the Spirit to flow into the world" (though perhaps not necessarily the Son of God)

***f) The Jewish cynic sage Jesus***

This is the Jesus put forth by John Dominic Crossan, a cochair of the infamous Jesus Seminar... Jesus was basically a social visionary

4. Darrel Bock and Daniel Wallace cite six claims that have penetrated culture, and that have led to these confused views of Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup>

**a) *“The original New Testament has been corrupted by copyists so badly that it can’t be recovered.”***

(1) Actually, there is overwhelming manuscript evidence for the New Testament, especially when compared to the textual evidence available for other ancient Greek and Latin manuscripts

(2) The amount of historic New Testament material that might actually be debated is less than one percent

**b) *“Secret Gnostic gospels, such as Judas, show the existence of early alternative Christianities.”***

(1) Actually these works appear later in history, and have no link to early Christianity.

(2) Their accounts of creation are so contradictory to the revelation of Genesis, that those who embraced the Hebrew Scriptures, as Jesus’ early followers did, would have never embraced the spurious gospels.

**c) *“The Gospel of Thomas radically alters our understanding of the real Jesus.”***

(1) Actually, this ‘hybrid’ gospel is a rehashing and remixing of Gnostic thought that had been around and discredited before.

(2) It is out of line with Judeo-Christian teaching at key points, and could not have been authored by someone who had been with Jesus and His early movement.

**d) *“Jesus’ message was fundamentally political and social, focusing on justice, against domination systems such as Rome or any global power (like the United States).”***

(1) Jesus certainly challenged the status quo, but the bulk of His message was that individuals must turn to God.

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<sup>7</sup> From *Dethroning Jesus*, pp.217ff.

(2) He spent more time in Galilee than in the “power center” of Jerusalem.

(3) He sought to shape a community within society that would impact the way society functions by upholding a way of living that was honoring to God, starting with changed hearts.

***e) “Paul took captive the original movement of Jesus and James, moving it from a Jewish reform effort to a movement that exalted Jesus and included Gentiles.”***

(1) There was a disagreement among the early followers of Jesus regarding the inclusive nature of the Gospel, e.g., that Gentiles would be included along with Jews.

(2) However, as the Letter to the Galatians shows, this issue was resolved, and there was unity among the Apostles on this issue. (Galatians 2:1-10)

***f) “Jesus’ tomb has been found, and His resurrection and ascension did not involve a physical departure.”***

(1) The ‘Jesus tomb’ issue has been around for years, and no reputable scholars accept it. It is essentially sensational TV fodder.

(2) Had the disciples known that Jesus’ body was in a tomb, they wouldn’t have risked their own lives by going back to the Temple, announcing His resurrection, and then spreading across the Roman Empire to proclaim the risen Christ, almost all gruesomely martyred in the process.

(3) Sunday, the ‘Third Day,’ the day of resurrection would not have become the day of worship for Jesus’ Jewish followers who had been committed to worship on the Jewish Sabbath.

## **B. ‘Dethroning’ Jesus leads to ‘Christless Christianity’**

**1. The Christological crisis leads inevitably to an ecclesiological crisis**

**2. Michael Horton has exposed this contemporary theological crisis in his book by that title: Horton is a committed follower of Christ who does not embrace the ideas he describes but seeks to expose them**

**3. This theological movement can best be captured in a chapter title in Horton's book:**

***a) The American Captivity of the Church***

- “Where everything is measured by our happiness rather than by God’s holiness, the sense of our being sinners becomes secondary, if not offensive.” (It’s important to preach happiness because that’s part of the Gospel, too. But it must happen in the context of the Gospel of repentance, and that’s why pastors like Dr. Ed Young can be trusted to preach on happiness... they are always going to balance it with holiness and the need for repentance.)
- “While the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church, the assimilation of the church to the world silences the witness.”
- “Assimilating the disruptive, surprising, and disorienting power of the Gospel to the felt needs, moral crises, and socio-political headlines of our passing age, we end up saying very little that the world could not hear from Dr. Phil, Dr. Laura, or Oprah.”
- “My argument... is not that evangelicalism is becoming theologically liberal but that it is becoming theologically vacuous.”
- United Methodist Bishop William Willimon: “Nothing is said (in churches who have lost confidence in the power of the Gospel) that could not be heard elsewhere... Unable to preach Christ and Him crucified, we preach humanity and it improved.”

***b) Naming our Captivity: Moralistic, Therapeutic Deism***

- “Several years ago a mainline theologian told me of his experience at an evangelical Megachurch... Although it was Easter, the message (with no clear text) was on how Jesus gives us the strength to overcome our obstacles... instead of meeting God and the announcement of a real victory over sin and death by Jesus Christ...”
- The “triumph of the therapeutic” has formed a new America religion, called by sociologist Christian Smith “Moralistic, Therapeutic Deism,” with the following characteristics
  - God created the world
  - God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and most world religions
  - The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself
  - God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when needed to resolve a problem
  - Good people go to heaven when they die

#### **IV. Interaction-Application**

C.S. Lewis spoke of a child content with making mudpies because it had never been to the beach and seen the sea.

The crisis in Christology has caused many in the church and in culture to forget the wonder and awesomeness of God coming into the world in the person of Jesus Christ. We become satisfied making mudpie religion.

Bock and Wallace: "Speaking historically, the earliest Christianity taught about the spiritual and personal benefits of knowing the exalted Jesus. An enthroned Jesus, not a dethroned one, is most able to lead us into the knowledge of God—and of ourselves." (p.227)