

Sermon Series – Church History

Week 3 – Christology, The Doctrine of Christ

Preached July 1, 2018 by Reverend Joylynn Graham

Something you may or may not know is that there is absolutely no evidence to prove conclusively that Jesus existed.

There are no archeological artifacts, nor are there any writings written by Jesus himself.

There are no official Roman records to show that Pontius Pilate executed a man named Jesus.

And, as far as we know, every writing we have about Jesus was written *after* his death by people who had never met him.

Yet there is no single person in all of human history who has been written about more.

From Roman and Jewish historians, to ancient and modern day secular historians, there is no shortage of writings about the Man from Galilee, and, an overwhelming majority of biblical scholars and historians all agree that Jesus lived as a real man.

Theodore Parker, a reformer and abolitionist, once said, "Suppose that Plato and Newton never lived - that their story is a lie - but who did their works and who thought their thoughts? It takes a Newton to forge a Newton. What man could have fabricated a Jesus? None but a Jesus."

I believe that our gospel reading for today supports this statement. Who else could speak words like that? And what writer would write words like that and give credit to someone who doesn't exist?

Christians make up nearly a third of Earth's 7.3 billion people. That comes out to about 2.3 billion people who all believe that somewhere around 2000 years ago there was a man named Jesus who walked the earth.

That's pretty amazing when you think about it; 2.3 billion people all following the same guy...

2.3 billion people who all agree that Jesus existed.

And 2.3 billion *different* understandings about who Jesus was and what it means to follow him.

All those different understandings despite a ton of church doctrine designed to answer any questions that Jesus neglected to answer while he was here.

Doctrine outlining all sorts of interesting things that Jesus never even hinted at such as Substitutionary Atonement<sup>1</sup>, the deity of Christ<sup>2</sup>, the resurrection of Christ<sup>3</sup>, salvation<sup>4</sup>, the Doctrine of the Trinity, the Doctrine of original sin, biblical doctrine, and so forth and so on...

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<sup>1</sup> (2 Corinthians 5:21)

<sup>2</sup> (John 1:1, 14)

<sup>3</sup> (1 Corinthians 15:17)

<sup>4</sup> (Ephesians 2:8-9)

All that work; all that doctrine; and we still, all of us, have our own take on what it means to follow Jesus.

What I think, may seem dubious to others.

Certainly, some of what I hear from others sounds dubious to me.

It just doesn't seem to want to sit still!

And according to history, that's how it's always been.

What most Christians do agree on is that Jesus was born somewhere around 4 BCE to Jewish parents, and he was executed by Roman authority sometime after the year 30.

His ministry took place within the region of Galilee, and the first followers, like him, were all Jews; either by birth, or by conversion.

And while there were many differences among even the earliest of followers, they all came together in the common understanding that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, and God's anointed one; and that through their belief in him, they were redeemed in the eyes of God<sup>5</sup>.

Jesus was a Jew and his disciples were Jews. There were no plans for starting a new religion. They had a religion complete with its own teachings and Bible.

Judaism was Jesus' religion. He embraced it. He practiced it. He savored it. And he died for it.

But, soon after he was gone, his followers began to draw the attention of the Gentiles.

Gentiles were converted to Judaism, but, as more Gentiles started signing on, things became more – complex, and the followers began to split into two branches.

One branch was based in Jerusalem and it was led by James, the brother of Jesus.

And the other branch, the Gentile Branch, was led by Paul.

Well you can bet there were tensions between Paul, Peter and James as they tried to figure out things like dietary laws and circumcision and uncleanness.

But in 62 C.E., James was stoned to death, and eight years later, Rome captured and destroyed Jerusalem.

The "Jerusalem branch" was crushed.

Which left Paul's "Gentile branch" to carry the Christian torch.

That's a pretty big twist don't you think? But it gets better...

Paul's letters are the earliest Christian writings we have. They were written long before the "official gospels" were written, maybe even as much as 30 years before.

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<sup>5</sup> Gonzalez, J. L., A Concise History of Christian Doctrine, P. 111

But Paul never met Jesus. And his letters contain almost no reference at all to Jesus' life as a human being.

His letters were written to his church plants to encourage them and to instruct them on how they were to live out their faith together. And in place of a "real Jesus," he substituted a "heavenly redeemer" who emphasized transformation through love and inward faith.

Out of twenty-seven books in the NT, thirteen are letters that were either written by Paul or attributed to Paul, and these letters were circulating long before the gospels showed up.

So it kind of makes you wonder, doesn't it?

Whose theology was he presenting?

If the gospels weren't written yet, and he didn't know Jesus personally, whose theology was he presenting?

This is a really important question, because The NT is the *basis* for the Doctrine of Christ, and nearly half of the NT was written by Paul.

And what Paul writes doesn't even fall in line with what Jesus preached. Or at least what we think he preached as told by the gospel writers who wrote long after Paul...

In the Gospels, Jesus preached the kingdom of heaven. Paul did not.

Paul preached justification by faith alone. Jesus did not. The messages of Jesus and Paul are *fundamentally different*.

And here's the real kicker...

The Christian faith is based on doctrine, with most of its doctrine – including the Doctrine of Christ – having been developed around Paul's teachings – not Jesus'.

That's some twist if you ask me!

Well, as I have said before, you can't have a conversation about doctrine without having a conversation about culture, because doctrine, in many ways, is a response to culture.

One of the most famous biblical scholars in the world, N. T. Wright, says:

*"Paul emerges as the one who invented what we now call 'Christian theology' – prayerful, scripture-fueled meditation on God, God's people and God's purposes – to meet the particular need: a community which had to be united and holy but which lacked the Jewish cultural symbols that had helped the Jews with their version of this vocation. "Theology" as Paul was doing it, and more importantly was teaching his churches to do it, was the way to corporate and individual human and Christian maturity and to sustaining the church in its life and witness."*

Paul was our first witness to the Jesus movement; he was a devout Jew, and within a decade of the death of Jesus, he articulated and spread all over the Mediterranean world what he called the gospel, or the good news of Jesus Christ

He was an amazingly effective evangelist for Jesus Christ.

And I don't care how you look at it, he's a pretty amazing theologian all on his own.

But why on earth would church doctrine favor the teachings of Paul over Jesus?

I don't have the answer to that question in this sermon. All I can say is "it's complicated."

But what came out of all that was the church – for better or worse – the body of Christ.

Somehow Paul managed to recast God's net of divine mercy for Israel, in a way that included the whole creation, and that became home for Christians – the body of Christ.

I don't believe Paul was trying to start a new religion either. I believe he was very enthusiastic about what he did, and clearly he was very good at it. He responded to a need. The church needed to be born. And Paul was to be its midwife.

But lately there has been a lot of push back over Paul's authority, and how his writings have been used throughout history to support twisted doctrine that exploits and abuses the most vulnerable among us.

And while I don't know for sure, I think that is at least in part what lies at the center of the great divide that we are seeing today in our faith and in our culture.

We're polarizing into fundamentalists and Progressives, with some of us seeking to reclaim a human Jesus who loved everyone, and who had visions of a world where the last came first and no one went without – while others continue to cling to a personal lord and savior who sacrificed *himself* so *they* could go to heaven.

What we're *not* remembering, is the source of our information, and the evolution and the history of its use.

We're not remembering the council of Nicaea in 325 which mandated that only four gospels were true and that the rest were heretic.

We're not remembering the council of Ephesus in 431 that sanctioned the divine nature of Jesus as being superior to his human nature.

We're not remembering the council of Calcedonia in 451 that accepted pope Leone I's theory that Jesus was both human and divine, based on Greek philosophy – and not on historical evidence or on the gospels' testimony.

We have only a few precious scraps of writing from people who sort of came close to knowing Jesus and that's it.

The rest is a bunch of old guys sitting around a table haggling over Jesus' divinity and constructing elaborate theologies that nobody understood then, or now.

But here's what I know...

When I read the beatitudes I feel a stirring in the depths of my soul and I know this is Jesus. I know he is echoing to me from long ago in the purest, most perfect language, revealing the secrets of the kingdom of heaven.

And then when I read Paul, I learn a lot more about how to live in harmony within that kingdom which Paul refers to as “a new creation!”

Jesus says to love one another, and Paul describes what that love looks like when he says “Love is Patient; Love is kind; it is not envious, boastful, arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ...”

In these troubled and divisive times we are becoming more and more polarized and divided over what it means to be a Christian.

Many of us are trying harder than ever to discern what it is that Jesus would have us do, and sometimes that translates into some pretty crazy stuff.

We don't have much to go on, but at the end of the day it's very simple: Love God, Love your neighbor, and treat others the way you would want to be treated in a similar situation.

Over and over Jesus recommended these three simple things and if we were to take them seriously enough, then those three simple things would be more than enough to keep any one of us preoccupied for life.

So imagine what it would be like if *everyone* were to focus on just those three things all at the same time... the kingdom of Heaven would be glowing all around us.

Jesus did not come to create an elite country club with an arbitrary list of requirements for who's in and who's out. Jesus came to reveal something that has always been true everywhere—for everyone—and for all time. We are in this together, and how we treat each other matters.

And Paul backs him up by painting a picture for us of what love looks like so that we can practice it on each other.

I get that out of scripture and it's enough. It's enough to keep me captivated by that long ago man from Galilee, and it's enough to give me glimpses every now and then of what the kingdom of heaven could look like if only we were to put down our bickering and our arguing and our need to be right long enough to realize it.

It might not be enough to prove his existence in a court of law, and the harder you try to pin it down the more nebulous it becomes, but for me it's enough. And I hope it is enough for you too.

May it be with you all according to God's Word...Amen