

Is All This
TALK
About
JESUS
Really
Necessary?

Sally A. Brown

Some questions come at you right between the eyes at the church door after the service.

You've heard them: "Okay, pastor, where did you come up with that word in the epistle lesson that you made so much of in the sermon?"

Your interrogator insists you were clearly mistaken, because that word's not in *his* zipper-girded, up-to-the-minute translation of the Bible (the one he got free for a small donation to one of those late-night television evangelists). Such questions can be challenging, especially when pressed with finger-jabbing zeal while other parishioners stand patiently waiting for a word with you. There are other questions, though, harder questions that develop slowly in a congregation's consciousness like hairline cracks appearing in the shield of community faith.

These questions, at work under the surface of congregational life, may seldom be voiced but may be, in the long run, more significant and more pervasive than queries pressed at the church door.

The question I have in mind is one of these, and I think it is being asked more and more by thoughtful persons who come to worship—not only by those exploring Christian faith for the first time or after a

long hiatus, but also by some who have practiced their faith for a long time. More and more people are wondering whether, in a world of many cultures and many faiths, it is either wise or necessary to lay so much stress in Christian life and worship on Jesus. The problem, for many, is not the Jesus of the Jesus seminar. That Jesus—the wise teacher, the social revolutionary, the spirit-person—is intriguing to many; discussing him makes fascinating dinner conversation. The problem for some, and perhaps for more than we might imagine, is the Jesus we affirm in liturgy and hymnody—Jesus Christ, the third person of the Trinity, incarnate, crucified, dead, and risen, the Jesus who we affirm has been sent by God “for us and for our salvation.”

I think of a woman who told me she had not joined in on saying the Apostles' Creed in church for years. “I stopped saying it,” she said, “the day I realized I didn't really believe it anymore, especially the parts about Jesus.” Scattered through our congregations, they are there: persons who ask, “Must we really put so much emphasis on Jesus?”

It is important to recognize, first of all, that not all of those who are uneasy with the Christocentricity of our churches—worship and public witness—are uneasy for the same reasons. Some feel put off by the overzealous evangelistic methods of hyped-up television preachers and their adherents. They want to distance themselves from such expressions of belief in Jesus. Others, encountering more and more religious diversity at work and in their neighborhoods, have begun to wonder whether affirming particular faith in Jesus Christ is appropriate in a world that we must share with persons from a great variety of religious faiths. Still others may be like the imaginary young questioner in Douglas John Hall's thoughtful book, *Why Christian?: For Those on the Edge of Faith*, who says, “I'm not convinced even believing in God is possible today. Why make it even more complicated by asking people to believe in Jesus?”¹

Whatever the genesis of the questions, preachers can assume that at least some in the congregation have questions about Jesus Christ. The fact is, questions about Christology may not be confined to the pew; those in the pulpit may, in fact, share their parishioners' uneasiness. One need not embrace the modernist, rationalist assumptions of a Bishop Spong (the assumption, for example, that the fruits of “objective,” rational, historical inquiry will lead us to the “real” Jesus, or that such inquiry is capable of yielding everything that is worth knowing about Jesus) to find views coming out of the Jesus seminar intriguing and perhaps even disturbing. Periodically rethinking one's

Christology and soteriology is important work for the preacher. Thus, preachers can welcome the chance to respond to questions afoot in the congregation as an opportunity to update their own understandings, lest they rely too long on unexamined formulations hammered out decades ago in seminary.

SOURCES OF UNEASINESS

Uneasiness with affirmations about Jesus Christ among faithful Christian worshipers no doubt has many sources. Front-page headlines about the Jesus seminar may have fueled the fires of skepticism for some, but this is probably only one source of doubt, and perhaps not a major one.

Douglas John Hall suggests that one factor contributing to fresh questioning about Jesus has been the breakdown of the marriage, however informal, between church and culture, especially in rural America. Not too long ago, Hall notes, many small towns in North America were held together, socially as well as culturally, by a handful of dominant Protestant or Roman Catholic congregations. As long as the practices and affirmations of Christocentric faith still functioned as cultural background assumptions in these communities, many who grew up in these enclaves were shaped by their social milieu as Christocentric believers. But now that this web of reinforcement is no longer in place for most of us (and that is not altogether a bad thing), those who were once “caused” by social circumstances to assume the practice of Christocentric faith must now construct “good reasons” to maintain these beliefs. In short, the question for some is whether worship of God centered in Jesus Christ is still culturally plausible.²

For others, it may be that, coincidentally, the restoration of fuller eucharistic liturgies has pressed questions about Jesus and salvation to the forefront of consciousness. Worshipers find themselves affirming, explicitly and frequently, in creeds and eucharistic prayers, strong Christian claims about incarnation, the relationship of Jesus to God, and the relationship of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus to salvation. Some, like my acquaintance who stopped saying the Creed, are not sure what it means today to participate in such corporate affirmations. In a culture

that puts great stress on autonomy and authenticity, the idea of *growing toward* faith by participating in corporate creeds and prayers that represent the faith of the tradition as a whole more than individual certitude has been largely lost. Creeds and prayers instead of functioning as maps of the territory within which Christian faith and doubt have been, and continue to be, negotiated are regarded as litmus tests of individual belief. Given such assumptions,

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weekly participation in these linguistic practices of faith can precipitate a crisis for some.

The preacher who senses that questions about the status of Jesus for faith, whatever their origins, are alive and growing in his or her congregation needs to be prepared not only to do some careful pastoral listening, but some solid theological homework. Pastorally, listening carefully to what people are really asking is essential. As Fred Craddock and others have been pointing out to us preachers for years, not least among our preaching tasks is to give the congregation a voice in the pulpit; that is, to bring to speech in the pulpit the hopes and fears, the questions and doubts, rising from the pews. The preacher will want, then, to give voice in the pulpit to the kinds of Christological questions that she or he senses are in the

air. Doing some serious theological digging and reflection will also be indispensable. Fortunately, for the pastor willing to do some reading and research, the past decade has seen the emergence of exciting new work dealing with Christological and soteriological questions. (The works cited in this essay are only a few of many recent studies worthy of a preacher’s attention.)

THREE QUESTIONS

Questions about Jesus have typically fallen into several recognizable categories. Three major questions that lie at the root of many others are these:

- ◆ Why do Christians make Jesus central to their faith in God?
- ◆ What about the relationship between God and Jesus?
- ◆ Are theories of bloody sacrifice and substitutionary atonement the only available accounts of the saving significance of the death of Jesus?

For some, the *root* question is, as Hall sums it up, “Why Jesus?” In other words, why should Jesus be the focal point of Christian faith? Why claim that God, for Christians, is known, particularly and in some sense, indispensably, through this human individual, known in ways that God cannot be known through other morally exemplary and spiritually insightful persons? This family of questions has been described by some theologians of the twentieth century as the “scandal of particularity.”

As Hall wisely points out, particularity, in and of itself, is not the problem. Every major faith, in one way or another, must grapple with that heuristic universal, “God” or “spiritual ultimacy,” in terms of some concrete human experience, “some particular being, event, writing, art, experience, or what-have-you.” Just as Buddhism has its Buddha, Jewish faith Abraham and the Torah, and Islam Muhammad, so “God in Christian belief is inseparable from . . . Jesus.”³ The question is not whether we encounter God through some experiential particular, but what kind of God the Christian God is and is not, if we affirm that God is self-revealed in Jesus. The God we encounter through Jesus, Hall further suggests, turns out to be a God

who indeed chooses to use particular human persons and communities and events to become involved in the life of the world. But that “chosenness” is not a chosenness that separates the chosen from the world or warrants smugness. It but means that the lives of those chosen will be poured out for the sake of the world as the interpretation of God’s passion for the world. If we know God in Jesus Christ, then particularity must break open into inclusion. The God we meet in Jesus Christ will stop at nothing to save all creation from “deathliness” of every kind.

Christian faith also makes claims, on the basis of its focus on Jesus, about who God is not. If certain dimensions of God are indispensably revealed in Jesus, then some of our assumptions about “Godness” are due for radical revision. In the Gospels, the more fully Jesus is caught up in the purposes of God, the more tenuous his hold on power and life itself seem to become. Furthermore, the God we know in Jesus is a God who practices solidarity with the world’s least conventionally religious people and society’s most vulnerable ones, a God self-out-poured at the Cross in such a way that the pretensions of coercive power are radically undermined at the very moment when they seem to have “won.”

Much is made of abuses perpetrated in the name of Jesus. But maybe we need to take a second look at Jesus. Jesus as the particular revelation of the nature of God is scandalous indeed—inclusive, eschewing coercion in every form, unimpressed with power and wealth, aligned with the least and the most defenseless of society. Meeting God precisely through Jesus Christ may be our best hope for being emancipated from our idolatrous obsession with status, celebrity, and the accumulation of a fail-safe retirement portfolio.

A *second* set of questions about Jesus Christ has to do with the fact that the Christian tradition has regarded Jesus not as merely “godlike,” but as somehow the very presence of God among us. Jesus is related to God as child to parent, say the classic creeds. I suspect it is around this very issue that many faithful worshipers in Christian congregations secretly enter a sort of caveat to parts of the liturgy. To honor Jesus as peculiarly—maybe even indispensably—insightful about God is one thing; to worship Jesus Christ as servant-Lord

may be quite another. Such uneasiness with worship directed to Jesus is closely bound up, of course, with questions about the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

One way to approach this question about the relationship between Jesus and God is to talk in terms of Jesus’ participation in both human and divine

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community. Jesus does not identify himself as God, but does seem to allude to a community within God, and to indicate that he himself is involved intimately in that divine community. The witness of the tradition is that Jesus named his connectedness to the divine community intimately, in terms of Parent, Son, and Spirit. It is this community within God that causes us to speak of the Trinity. As William Placher has put it, “Christians did not start talking about the Trinity because of some fondness for the number three.” Rather, “they did so because they found they had to, in order to say what they needed to say about the particular God they had come to know in three particular ways.”⁴ Eastern theologians speak of *perichoresis*, a dance, if you will, within God that is essential to the nature of God.

Jesus has been understood from earliest Christian tradition as direct participant both in the dance of community internal to the divine nature and in human community. Because Jesus is fully participant in human and divine community, the relatedness that is the life of God becomes our very life—not by analogy, not by imitation, but as we by baptism become incorporated into the death and destiny of Jesus.

A *third* category of questions has to do with the relationship between the idea of “salvation” and the death and

resurrection of Jesus. Why connect the death of Jesus with a concept of human salvation? From what can the death of Jesus be said to “save” us? Uneasiness with the death of Jesus and its significance for us is due, in part, to a strange silence in the pulpit on the subject. In a recent article, S. Mark Heim points out that because many preachers are themselves uncomfortable with traditional transactional views of the atonement—Anselmian penal substitutionary satisfaction, expiatory sacrifice, ransom-to-the-devil, and the like—the result has been that, in many pulpits, “silence, or discreet mumbling, on this subject is far from unusual.”⁵ Fortunately for the preacher, a number of able theologians are grappling today with the significance of Jesus’ death.

Douglas John Hall proposes that we need to rethink what it is we claim Jesus’ death saves us from as a clue to ways of speaking of its significance. An examination of the Christian tradition indicates that this has been a culturally particular matter. Atonement theories of past centuries were developed in cultures where the ultimate terrors were the terrors of the power of death and the eternal consequences of guilt. Both the nature of God’s justice and holiness, as well as the meaning of Jesus’ death, were negotiated within these frameworks of meaning. But today, Hall suggests, our deepest anxieties arise from other terrors. For some, Jesus’ death can only have saving significance if it delivers us from the terrors of oppression. One reinterpretation of Jesus’ death within this framework is represented by the work of liberation theologian Leonardo Boff.⁶ Hall himself reinterprets the death of Jesus as salvation from the “deathliness” of our culture’s deep suspicion that human existence is utterly purposeless.

Consistently high suicide rates and random violence suggest that a gaping



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cavern of futility has been opened up, on the one hand, by the failed Enlightenment quest for indubitable foundations, and on the other, by the potentially endless regress of arbitrary signs offered us by more extreme forms of postmodern thought. The Cross signifies God's saving solidarity with us in our vulnerability, reveals that our purpose is solidarity with the most vulnerable among us, and reveals

the nature of divine power as self-out-poured love, not the desperate will-to-power of violent self-assertion.

Another fresh approach to the Cross is the "soteriology of salvage" proposed by feminist homiletical theologian L. Susan Bond. Bond presents her soteriology as a reinterpretation of what she takes to be one of the most primitive Christian interpretations of the Cross, a Christus Victor

understanding of the Cross as God's decisive stroke against coercive and destructive power. Building her soteriology out of elements taken from traditional Christian thought as well as postmodern insights, Bond bids us preach the Cross as the sign of God's ineradicable commitment to "salvage" all of creation.⁷

Of course, responding to Christological and soteriological questions in preaching won't be accomplished in a single sermon. More likely, engaging questions about the primacy of Jesus will take the form of thoughtful reflection in a variety of sermons on the Christological issues raised by biblical texts, liturgy, and worshipers' experiences in a pluralistic world. Susan Bond points out, for example, that hymns and liturgy are resources that powerfully shape—or powerfully challenge—the "working" Christological and soteriological imagination of many worshipers, and that a very helpful approach might be to present a series of sermons that bring biblical texts into conversation with well-known phrases from hymns and liturgical affirmations, particularly creeds and eucharistic prayers.⁸

While worshipers' questions about Jesus may seem daunting to the preacher, one can hardly imagine a more stimulating challenge or more pastoral act than to bring together in sermons the best of recent theological imagination, creative reflection about the significance of the words we say and the actions we share in worship, and honest personal conviction. Preachers who do so are bound to find their own faith stretched and deepened in the process. □

1 Douglas John Hall, *Why Christian? For Those on the Edge of Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), 17.

2 *Ibid.*, 3-14.

3 *Ibid.*, 22.

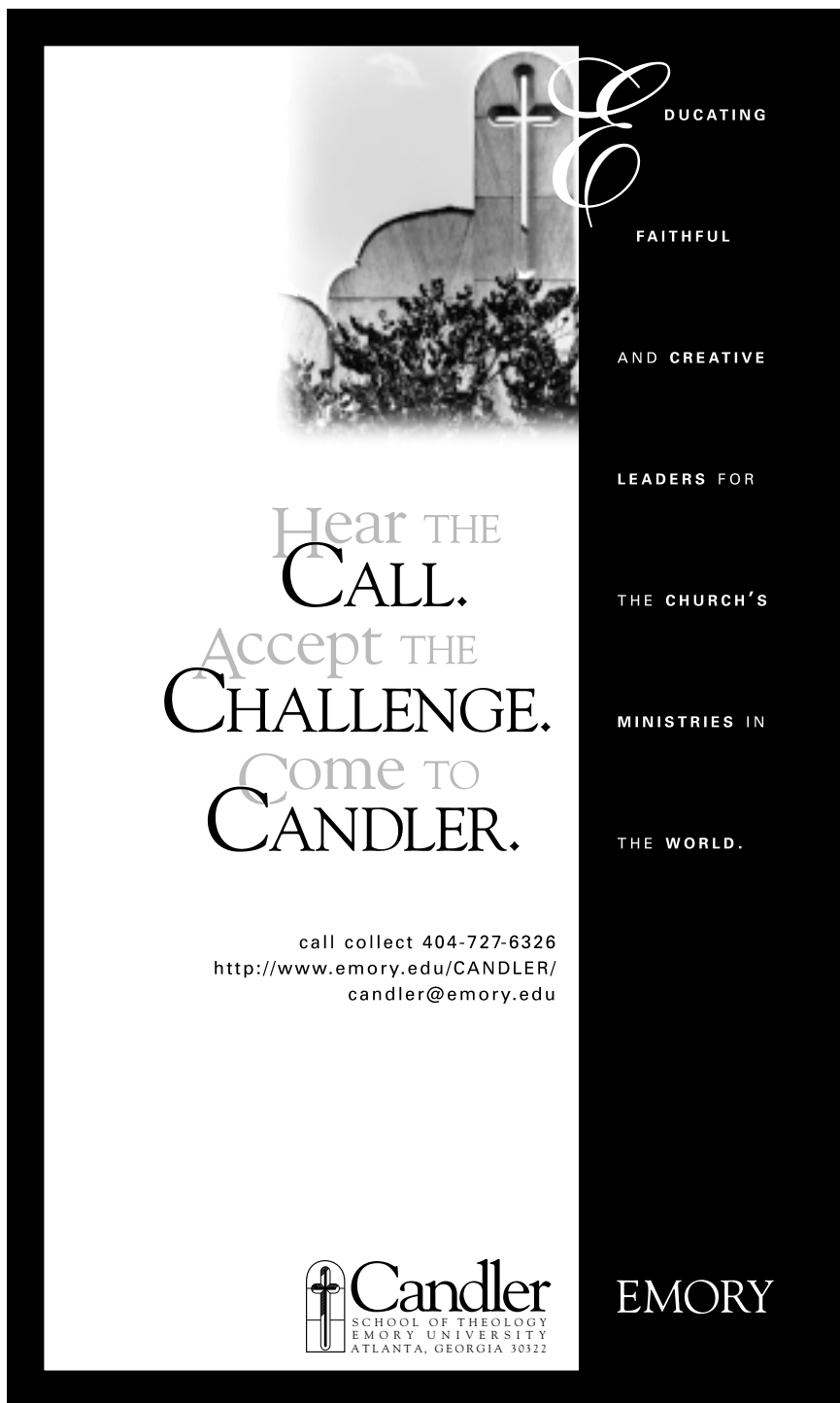
4 William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology, and Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 56.

5 S. Mark Heim, "Christ Crucified: Why Does Jesus' Death Matter?" *The Christian Century* 118:8 (March 7, 2001), 12.

6 See Boff, *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987).

7 See L. Susan Bond, chap. 4, "A Metaphorical Christology of Salvage," in *Trouble with Jesus: Women, Christology, and Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999), 109-50.


8 *Ibid.*, 15-21, 109-15.



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