

Jesus in the Sermon:

Who Is He and What Does He Do?

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Last year George Gallup, Jr., and George O'Connell published *Who Do Americans Say That I Am?*,¹ an attempt to determine by opinion polls and other statistical data what Christians believe about Jesus Christ, themselves, and the role of the church in society. The results are interesting but not very helpful. While theologians can be justly accused of failing to take empirical data into account when they talk about the beliefs of "the church," it is always dangerous for social scientists to conduct surveys about theology. This book is a case in point. The appendix lists thirty-five questions and the responses. Many of the questions attempt to determine what people in the United States believe about Jesus. As is often the case, however, the survey reveals as much about the people who designed the survey as it does about those who answered the questions.

The first four questions are particularly interesting. The first asks whether Jesus Christ lived and whether he was God. Of the small percentage who said they believed that Christ lived but was not God, the second question asks, "Do you wish to believe in the divinity of Jesus?" The third question attempts to focus on what precisely the respondent believes about Jesus by listing six statements and asking the respondent to pick one. The options range from "Jesus was divine in the sense that he was in fact God living among men [sic]," to "Frankly, I'm not entirely sure there really was such a person." The fourth question asks the respondent how important in his or her life is the belief that Christ was fully God and fully human.

In some ways, the questions are more interesting than the answers. In various forms, respondents are asked whether they believe that Jesus was God (or as the questions are sometimes posed, whether Jesus was "divine"). The first question, for example, asks explicitly whether "Christ was God." (In case you are interested in the results, seventy per cent of all respondents said "yes.") But except for the fourth question, respondents are never asked to affirm unequivocally that Jesus Christ was human. The fourth question presents the respondent with the church's classical Christological formula (fully God and fully human) or at least a paraphrase of it, but the affirmation of Christ's humanity is tied to the affirmation that he was fully God. While the respondents are given ample opportunity to affirm their belief that Christ was "fully God," they are at no point asked to affirm the single assertion that Christ was "fully human."

A careful reading of the survey questions leads one to the conclusion that those who designed the survey are more interested in affirming that Christ was truly God than that he was fully human. This may or may not be docetism, but

the survey certainly has that stench about it. One might defend the survey by arguing that theologians have been out of touch with the faith of the church for centuries. One might argue that despite what the church said in the fifth century at Chalcedon, the pews of Christian churches have been filled for centuries with people who affirm and practice docetism. They affirm that Christ is God and struggle with the affirmation that he is, at least "in part," human. And they live that way. Because Christ is not "of this world" (and is not one with us in our humanity), they harbor the belief that the church is not or should not be of this world. Nor should those who "live in him." Christians and their church should no more be of this world than is their Christ. Consequently, while the official faith of the church through the centuries has been that affirmed at Chalcedon, one might well argue that the unofficial but normative faith of the church (or at least the pew) is a different faith altogether.

Perhaps it is the difference between these two theologies—one official and the other operative—that explains why it is rare that we hear a sermon that simply and clearly affirms the full humanity of Jesus. It is not at all unusual to hear a sermon that bravely affirms that Jesus is God, but it is rare to hear one that affirms Jesus' humanity. Perhaps the docetism that appears (pun intended) to dominate the life of the church is nurtured by what those who sit in the pew hear in the sermon. "Parish" the thought! Those of us who have accepted God's call to be what one tradition, the Reformed, referred to as "teaching elders" just may have to bear more than a small amount of the responsibility for the docetism that surrounds and engulfs us.

My suspicion is that those of us who preach and teach in the life of the church have encouraged, despite our best intentions, those who sit in the pew to believe in a docetic Jesus. We do that in two ways. We do so by what we say and what we do not say about Jesus. And we nurture docetism by how we use Jesus in the sermon.

It is not easy to preach about Jesus. One senses that when the topic of the sermon is Christology, most preachers try to be more careful than usual about their theology. That may be nothing more than a wise and appropriate recognition that Jesus Christ stands at the center of Christian faith and of what Christians believe about the triune God. It may also be due to the fact that the preacher is aware of the theological gulf that separates him or her from the pew. If the preacher has had the benefit of theological education, he or she knows something of what the church affirmed at Chalcedon; the preacher probably also recognizes how few folks in the pew are able to affirm that faith.

The best way to handle this difficulty is to retreat to safe generalities. It is far easier to deal with Jesus at the level of the general and the abstract than it is at the point of the specific and the particular. It is far easier to talk about the love of God in Jesus of Nazareth than it is to talk about what kind of man this Jesus is. When was the last time you heard a sermon on the significance of the fact that Jesus was Jewish? In the words of The First Letter of John, that "which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands," we have heard and seen and touched in a Jewish man. Why is it that these words from The Confession of 1967 of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) have the capacity to jar the ears of so

many of us? "Jesus, a Palestinian Jew, lived among his own people and shared their needs, joys, and sorrows."

For many Christians the confession that Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one of God, entails that Jesus must also be more than human, larger than life itself. The consequence of that understanding of Jesus is that beliefs about him become more important than Jesus himself and the tasks to which he calls his disciples. It is not surprising that theological formulas and doctrines become more significant (and easier to live with) than the first century Jew who was obsessed with the impending kingdom of God. Ernest T. Campbell may have distinguished too sharply between the two, but he captured something of this tension in his article "Are You Following Jesus or Believing in Christ?"² Hopefully, Christians are doing both. It does seem the case, however, that many Christians believe in Christ rather than follow Jesus. The general and the abstract is simply easier to live with than the specific and the particular.

One reason we prefer generalities about Jesus to the man himself may be that generalities by their very nature are easier to reconcile with different situations and points of view than are the particular, specific, and concrete. It may be easier to reconcile theological formulas about Jesus with our cultural values and lifestyles than it is to reconcile the latter with the man who said, "Whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another, commits adultery." What is attractive about theological generalities is that they are compatible with a variety of "points of view" or ideologies. To use the idiom of our day, theological abstractions "have wheels" in a way that the man Jesus may not. Theological generalities are more easily reconciled with various political ideologies and economic systems than the strange Jew from Nazareth. It is one thing to insist that no political structure or economic system can be identified with the kingdom of God. It is something else to make Jesus the servant and proclaimer of the political and economic values of any given culture.

For example, it is interesting that in their statistical study of American Christians, Gallup and O'Connell attempt to correlate the belief that "Jesus was God" with the belief that "relation with Jesus increases self-worth a great deal." They appear to follow the lead of Robert Schuller in thinking that there is some necessary relationship between the two, that believing Jesus is God results in an increase in self-worth. Presumably, they do not understand this increase in self-worth in economic terms, but any correlation of the two seems difficult at best in light of Jesus' claim that "the first shall be last and the last first."

If the preacher and those in the pew retreat to theological generalities about Jesus, they run the risk of furthering the development of docetism. Docetism lifts Jesus out of his humanity and his particular historical context and in so doing makes it possible to turn him into something he is not, something or someone with whom we can live. In its better moments, the church has recognized that its beliefs and theological formulas about Jesus are rooted in the particular figure of Jesus of Nazareth as we encounter him in biblical narrative. The struggle for preachers and theologians is to make the theological formulas about Christ consistent with and subservient (or in the language of

church polity, “subordinate”) to the man Jesus as he meets us in the concreteness and particularity of biblical narrative.

Wolfhart Pannenberg states the issue clearly when he writes, “Jesus’ unity with God is not to be conceived as a unification of two substances, but as this man Jesus is God.”³ The confession that Jesus is God can mean almost anything unless it is understood in relation to “this man.” It is as “this man” or in “this way” that Jesus is God—not as any other man or in any other way. Hence, we must begin with the man Jesus as he meets us in the biblical story in all his particularity. We must begin here and end here, and not begin and end with abstractions or pious sentiments about Jesus. Perhaps this is what Luther had in mind when he argued that all theology must be done at the foot of the cross. Jesus did not simply die. He died this way. And the manner of his death matters greatly for understanding who he is. The significance of Jesus’ death cannot be captured fully and adequately by any theological doctrine of the atonement. Nor should any theory of the atonement become finally more significant than the narrative accounts of Jesus’ death. The former must always be held accountable to the latter.

Perhaps the test case for whether we preachers and those Christians who sit in the pew are mired in docetism is how we interpret the death of Jesus. Did Jesus go to the cross knowing full well what the future held or did he go trusting in God but knowing nothing of the future? Are we able to say with A Declaration of Faith that Jesus’ “knowledge was limited by his time and place in history”? The easier route is the one that docetism offers. A Jesus who knows the future may not be a Jesus who is fully human, but he is the right kind of god. On the other hand, as Raymond E. Brown reminds us, “A Jesus for whom the future was as much a mystery, a dread, and a hope as it is for us and yet, at the same time, a Jesus who would say, ‘Not my will but yours’—this is a Jesus who could effectively teach us how to live, for this is a Jesus who would have gone through life’s real trials.”⁴

Finally, it is not just what we say and do not say about Jesus that nurtures the development of docetism in the church. Equally important is how we use Jesus in the sermon. Too often in sermons and elsewhere in the ministry of the church, we preachers use Jesus as the divine book by which we extricate ourselves from a difficult, if not potentially embarrassing, situation or at least get ourselves off stage. How many times have you dug a hole so deep in the sermon that it appeared there was no resolution, no way out? Having exposed the complexity of life, the nuances and difficulties of a particular problem, the only way to solve the problem (or at least end the sermon) is to bring in Jesus. We trot him in from the wings in a manner that may remind the children (at least the older ones) in the congregation of the dependability of the Lone Ranger in times of trouble. In ways that are not always clear or believable, Jesus saves us from the crisis at hand, and, before they know it, the members of the congregation have stood and recited The Apostles’ Creed. To use Jesus that way is no less docetic and no less damaging to the congregation’s faith in Jesus than what we actually say about him. Just as Jesus lived a human life, without the assistance of legions of angels to rescue him from trouble, the preacher must do no less. Jesus Christ may be the mystery at the basis of Christians faith, but

we dare not manipulate him in order to bring the sermon to an end. Mysteries, real holy mysteries, are not at our disposal.

NOTES

¹ George Gallup, Jr., and George O'Connell, *Who Do Americans Say That I Am?* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986).

² Ernest T. Campbell, "Are You Following Jesus or Believing in Christ?" in *A.D.*, Vol. 10, No. 7 (August, 1981), pp. 20-21.

³ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), p. 283.

⁴ Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *Jesus—God and Man* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1967), p. 105.