

Who is Jesus? Part 2- Messiah, Light of Gentiles, King of kings

Written by Calvin Fox

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The earliest writings in the New Testament are Pauline. We learn almost nothing about the life, teaching and crucifixion of Jesus from Paul. We owe that material to the Gospels, which were not written for at least 30 years after the crucifixion. Where did the Gospel writers and editors get the material? It came from the original Apostles and eye witnesses. This material would have been preserved and passed on orally for all those years. To that oral Tradition which predates the New Testament we are indebted for learning that Jesus was an Aramaic speaking religious and cultural Jew and was first known as a Rabbi, a peripatetic Teacher some of whose teaching was also preserved orally and passed on, but who was famous for speaking in parables, arguing with religious leaders of the day and breaking a lot of cultural taboos. He was soon considered to be a Prophet and finally, the promised Messiah. Miracles, Healings and Exorcisms were attributed to him. An important excursus: The Gospels are not biographies. They are theological documents. Most of the material is about the last week of Jesus' 3 year ministry at the end of his 33 year old life. It is significant the Apostle Paul makes almost no mention of the earthly life of Jesus or his teaching with the singular and notable exception of what happened in the Upper Room at the Passover Meal that would become the "Lord's Supper". Paul passes on the oral Tradition of what Jesus said and did on the occasion and that was primarily about the sacrificial and salvific purpose of his coming death (cf. 1Cor 11:23-25).

The particular oral material that found its way into written form as the Gospel according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John was chosen and shaped by the interests, and to meet the needs, of the local churches for which each of the different Gospels was composed. We believe that the Holy Spirit was involved in this process. He superintended the collection and shaping of the material into their final forms (cf. Luke 1:1-4). He "inspired" the writers and editors as they wrote to suit their theological purposes (cf. John 20:30-31). Thus, we rightly accept the canonical Gospels in their entirety as the Word of God. I believe it is wrongheaded to extract, sort and reassemble, out of immediate and extended contexts, all that is alleged Jesus actually said (the "red letter" verses) and claim those words to be the Word within the Word- the true teachings of Jesus, somehow superior to all the verses printed in black. This practice is increasingly popular today, but it sounds more like what Thomas Jefferson believed or Marcionism and less like the classic Doctrine of Scripture based on texts like 2 Tim 3:16.

Jesus, the Light of the Gentiles

In their concern and effort to spread the Gospel among the Gentile Nations and peoples, Christians in the first three or four centuries made a concerted effort to find ways to connect that Gospel with beliefs in Pagan Religions and Literature. They had a conviction that God was already at work among the Gentiles, preparing them for Christ. He would be what they were seeking all along. I hear this Theory expressed often today from missionaries to Moslems. (There is some Truth in Islam. We must begin with that and build on it.) Paul seems to be using it in Acts 17-

22 Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. 23 For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. 28 'For in him we live and move

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and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

Professor Pelikan presents examples from three sources that early Preachers mined for connecting points with their audience: references in dramas and poems to a prophesied Messiah (often interpreted by the Gentiles as a coming Emperor) and doctrines found in philosophers like Homer and Plato that could be connected with teaching about Jesus, e.g. - about Wisdom, Reality, Knowledge, "God" and the Eternal. Early Christian writers also sought to find, in the Myths and Histories of Pagan Peoples, types of Christ or someone or some event that they could interpret as prefiguring Christ and His work of Redemption. Using this material they sought to relate to their pagan audiences and secure an opening for the Gospel.

Although the Theory is different, it could be said these early Evangelists were being "missional". They were connecting with the culture of their time, seeking relevance, trying to use language and concepts already current and familiar to their listeners. Christian Apologists have been trying to do this throughout the ages. It is not new. The common criticisms heard today about this practice have always applied. Has the true Gospel been compromised or changed in the effort. How many Pagan ideas have unwittingly been adopted and allowed to influence and shape Christian Doctrine? Such questions are always important to ask. When does the well-intentioned effort to be relevant cross over into compromise? Can other songs replace the Songs of Zion?

Psalm 137:3 ... our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" 4 How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?

That is still an important question. We must sing Zion's songs, but how do we do it in an alien culture, among today's Pagans?

It is also possible that methods (concepts, phrases and catch words, clothing, speaking style, music, video) adopted for effective evangelism in one place and time can become dated, ineffectual and even counterproductive when used at a different time and place. In an effort to connect and use what is relevant, current and timely, Christians have been known to quickly become irrelevant, out of touch and even silly in their evangelistic efforts.

King of Kings

On Jesus' cross was a sign reading, "King of kings". The constant Theme of his preaching had been the coming of the Kingdom of God. Pilate asked Jesus at his trial, "Are you a King?" Christians have always answered with an emphatic "Yes". The definition of that Kingdom and the understanding of what kind of King Jesus is has often been debated. Some expected the establishment of a literal King and Kingdom. Others, expecting and finding conflict with local and Roman authorities over this matter, were eager to explain the King and Kingdom as spiritual and not of this world.

The Biblical title of "King" for Jesus is the source for a "Political Jesus" in the minds of many, especially after the conversion to Christ of the Emperor Constantine in 312. The dominate

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“image” of Jesus went from Rabbi to Light of the Gentiles to King and the Kingdom of God came to be identified with the institutional Church. The Head of that Institution (the Bishop of Rome) was the Vicar of Christ on earth. He was Monarch of a real Monarchy (the One, Holy, Catholic Church) wielding a political sword for spiritual purposes. The Roman Emperor wielded a political sword for temporal purposes. The exact relationship between the powers was often in dispute. Both claimed they ruled by Divine Right and with God’s Authority. Roman Empire and Kingdom of God (aka the Church) were entwined in History, in the minds and hearts of most Christians, until at least the 16th Century Reformation. Beyond that period the synergistic relationship between Church and State, cooperating and competing, has persisted in many Countries into the Modern Era.

In the United States, Church and State are constitutionally separate, however America has a strong, unofficial quasi-Judeo-Christian Civil Religion and many Christians as individuals, as well as through many para-church organizations, are very much involved in political affairs. “Constantinian” is now a pejorative term used by some people when they believe that the “Church” is in the service of the State in America, usually in support for an unpopular war or foreign policy. This is one of the most contentious issues of our day among Christians, as well as in debate with Secularists.