

## **“Deal with Jesus”**

**by Donne Hayden**

In late March, I attended a two-day workshop on Experiments with Light, which is “a guided Quaker meditation devised by British Friend Rex Ambler, Professor Emeritus of Philosophical Theology, University of Birmingham, England.”<sup>1</sup> Ambler’s goal in devising these “experiments with Light” was to help contemporary Friends focus so they might achieve some of the intensity in worship described by early Friends. In Ambler’s guided meditation, people are encouraged to apply the Light to their own condition, turn the Light on themselves, paying attention to any images, words or phrases that come to their awareness. Many times nothing happens, but occasionally something meaningful rises up during the meditation. My experience during the March workshop included both—one session was filled with vivid images of stars burning and Universal Love, while a couple of sessions were characterized by “dryness” (a Quaker term describing lack of contact with the Light).

On the second day, during the morning guided meditation, a phrase floated through my consciousness which I have not shared with anyone until now, when it feels like the time has come to do so. That phrase was “Deal with Jesus.” I did not feel led to “accept Jesus as my personal savior,” but simply to address Jesus, what he means in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, what he means or can mean or has meant to individuals, what is he to me.

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<sup>1</sup> Quakers in Pastoral Care and Counseling website, <http://www.qpcc.us/7101/index.html>

The admonition was a challenge. I have a somewhat conflicted relationship with Jesus: I am and always have been attracted to and swayed by—completely convinced by—his teachings, but put off by the blood theology of Christianity that surrounds him. As a consequence, I often avoid talking about him. (Fortunately for me, I found a Quaker congregation that does not demand that I do so.) Still, the subject of Jesus keeps coming up—for instance, in the presumptuous questions sent to our meeting from the Executive Committee of Wilmington Yearly Meeting about our views on the divinity of Christ, etc., and in the discussion in our meeting that followed.

During Query Group discussions in the past few weeks, it has become clearer that, as a congregation, we are all over the place as to what we believe about Jesus. Those in the Query Group indicate they would like to know more; they suggested having study groups on the New Testament and/or on the historical Jesus,<sup>2</sup> not to rely on other people's interpretations, but to go to the sources and read them again to see for ourselves. Last week, and this week, Dean Gardner (a seeker if I ever saw one) earnestly asked in the Query Group, "If we say we follow the teachings of Jesus what does that mean? What *are* the teachings of Jesus—which ones? I don't really know. I never hear anyone at Meeting talk about Jesus or his teachings."

Hmmm . . . It struck me that perhaps it was time to "deal with Jesus."

First, a disclaimer.

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<sup>2</sup> As a side note, beginning in September, the Sunday morning Query Group will be reading and discussing *Remedial Christianity: What Every Believer Should Know about the Faith but Probably Doesn't* by Paul Alan Laughlin, a professor in the Department of Religion and Philosophy at Otterbein College, in Westerville, Ohio, and a member of the Jesus Seminar, a group of scholars dedicated to study of the historical Jesus.

We all have equal access to the Divine; we each have a relationship with the Divine, unique and individual, and we each understand truth through our own filter. I have no special knowledge that makes my opinion any better than yours—I just happen to be the one tasked with speaking each Sunday. I will share the Truth as it has been revealed to me and as I understand it. Please know I am not trying to convince you to agree with me. I am telling you *my* truth about Jesus, not *the* truth about Jesus, which no one can ever really know.

New Testament scholars distinguish between *the historical Jesus* (“the human being who lived in first-century Palestine”) and the *Christ of faith* (“the object of religious devotion for subsequent generations of Christians.”<sup>3</sup> The teachings of the historical Jesus resonate deeply with me, but I have misgivings about “the Christ of faith.” In fact, I find that in order to *deal with Jesus*, I must first separate him from Christianity. To talk about *his* teachings, I must separate them from the teachings of the church.

The quotations in today’s bulletin from Leo Tolstoy and Thomas Jefferson are two examples, among many, of great thinkers through the centuries who have found, mingled with remnants of the inspired teaching of Jesus, other teachings “which are repugnant and contrary to it,” in Tolstoy’s words. These “contrary” teachings came from church authorities who selected, edited or *wrote* them, and in so doing, created the religion we know as Christianity. The early church fathers (and they were, without exception, men) seemed to prefer Paul’s teachings to Jesus’ teachings—perhaps they

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Alan Laughlin, *Remedial Christianity: What Every Believer Should Know About the Faith, but Probably Doesn't*. Polebridge Press, 2000.

understood Paul better than Jesus. In fact, they preferred what they found in Paul's letters to such an extent that Christianity would be more aptly named "Paulinity."

Scholars of the Jesus Seminar have identified portions of the New Testament which most closely reflect what Jesus, the man and historical figure, probably said and taught. About 20% of New Testament material is close to what Jesus might actually have said; the other 80% comes from other authors, other times, interpretations by people with their own agendas. But close examination of the text shows that Jesus' teachings are characterized by several qualities. First, his teachings do not focus on theological concepts, but on human behavior. Jesus' teachings are simple and uncomplicated at the same time they admonish us to do the very things we find *most* difficult, i.e., love each other, forgive each other, avoid judging each other, avoid violence against each other, value things of the spirit above things of the body, and so on. These are so simple and so hard. Second, Jesus' teaching uses metaphor, parable, story and other concrete language that helps us remember what he said. This may be responsible for the fact that his teachings remain in spite of what has been done to them through the centuries.

The "Christ of faith" linked in our minds with Jesus, as in "Jesus Christ," is a figure created primarily in the mind and understanding of Paul of Tarsus. My favorite theologian, Paul Alan Laughlin, calls him "the original theologian of Christianity."<sup>4</sup> I think of the apostle Paul as a used-car salesman, as a marketer; he *marketed* Christianity; he got the word out; he spread it about the known world (at least the Mediterranean part of it). Paul was a wing-ding salesman.

In his letters, written in the decades immediately after the death of the historical Jesus, Paul provided "definitive explanations" for the doctrines of Incarnation and

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<sup>4</sup> Laughlin, p.118.

Atonement, “which are the heart of the Christian religion . . . traceable not to Jesus’ teachings about the kingdom of God, but to the subsequent teachings of Paul about Jesus-as-the-Christ.”<sup>5</sup>

Though Paul’s version of things is incredibly complicated and requires the “willing suspension of disbelief”; it asks us to go against everything we know is possible and true, but his version prevailed and dominated the church. In the following centuries, theologians focused on Paul’s concepts and further complicated them. When Christianity became the state religion, people could meet and talk openly about what they believed for the first time. In doing so, however, they exposed the variety and disparity of interpretation among Christians, so in 325 CE, close to 300 years after the death of Jesus the man, Emperor Constantine called a council of bishops to settle the matter once and for all of what Christians must believe.

I can only point out to you how distant in time, how distant in culture, how distant in understanding, were these people—involved with the state, government and power—how *far* they had wandered from the true teachings of Jesus.

The council of bishops in 325 C.E. resulted in what we know as the Nicene Creed, still widely used in Christian churches.

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<sup>5</sup> “Certainly the most influential person in the process of defining Jesus as the Christ was none other than Paul, who . . . had never known the historical Jesus, and whose writings show little knowledge of, or for that matter interest in, either the life of Jesus or his message. Paul makes no mention of events in the ministry of Jesus and never cites his teachings, though some scholars believe they have found a few echoes of these in several of Paul’s writing. But in the little he does say about Jesus’ life, he reveals a disproportionate interest in its culmination: of the twenty-one verses from his writings cited . . . as referring to Jesus’ life, more than three-quarters of them have to do with the events immediately surrounding his death and resurrection. Apparently these were the only reports about the earthly Jesus that interested Paul.” (Laughlin, page 121)

## **The Nicene Creed**

*We believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.*

*And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried, and the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father. And he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end.*

*And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceedeth from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets. And we believe one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins. And we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.*

This is a teaching **about** Jesus; it is **not** one of his teachings. Notice that the creed mentions only Jesus' birth and death; it says **nothing** about what he taught.

So what *are* his teachings? Responding to this will take a few weeks and several messages, but nothing is more fundamental to the teachings of Jesus than what he said about the Kingdom of God. For centuries, theologians interpreted, analyzed, debated

and discussed what Jesus meant when he said, “The Kingdom of God is among you,” or “the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” Among the many theological responses to this image, one move was to ignore such statements since they clearly made no sense—how could the Kingdom of God be among us? Looking around, they did not see the world as they imagined it ruled by God, so instead of “here” and “now,” which is what Jesus said, theologians and their adherents insisted the Kingdom of God must lie in the future sometime, “there” and “then.” The church used this “coming of the Kingdom of God” to bludgeon people into acceptance, to make them afraid that if they didn’t believe what the church said, they would be punished when the kingdom of God did come.

One New Testament text was frequently cited in defending this interpretation—The Book of Revelation. Like most people I successfully avoided reading the Book of Revelation for most of my life but finally, in my last semester at seminary I had to read it for a class. To be honest, until I read Revelation, I hadn’t really thought much about the “kingdom of God.” If I noticed the phrase at all, I assumed it referred to traditional ideas of Heaven or something to do with the end of the world.

The author of the Book of Revelation probably belonged to a group of early Christians, who in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century, were being persecuted by the Romans. Sixty to eighty years after the death of Jesus, this early Christian author did not write the book as a prediction, but to talk about his own particular time and place. He used the code language of imagery because it was dangerous to openly criticize the powerful Roman Empire. In the Book of Revelation, the terms “kingdom” and “empire” are central images: read it some time to see how it describes the conflict between the empire (kingdom) of God and the earthly empire of Rome.

According to the teaching of Jesus, we *choose* whether to live in the Kingdom of God or in an earthly empire ruled by power, competition and violence. Jesus used language people could understand through metaphors relevant to their lives. “The Kingdom of God is within you,” he said. Think about what such a statement meant. Those listening to him lived in a *kingdom*, but it was a kingdom governed by humans as we live in a nation, a republic, a democracy, governed by humans. But Jesus said to the people listening to him: “Within *you*, ***inside you***, you who are poor, who are oppressed and powerless, you who have nothing, ***within you*** is something far greater than any human power; ***within you*** is that of God; ***within you*** is where *God* rules. Humans may rule the material world, but Divine Love rules the part in each of us which is not limited to material and temporal reality.

Throughout the gospels, Jesus tells his followers about the qualities valued in the Kingdom of God. For instance, in the Gospel of Mark an interchange between Jesus and a scribe emphasizes the connection between God and love. Jesus is in the temple in Jerusalem being questioned by the authorities, the Pharisees and Sadducees; a scribe listens for a while and then asks Jesus, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus responds that the first commandment is to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength,” and the second most important commandment is to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

This is as straightforward as you can get: Bottom line, Jesus, what’s your message? “Love God, love your neighbor and love yourself.” The scribe agrees, adding that following these commandments is “more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices,” people might give, and Jesus tells him approvingly that he is “not far from the kingdom of God” (Mk. 12:28-34). Those in the kingdom of God recognize the

importance of love and compassion above all else. If you can get that, you can live there. You are *there* if you understand that.

Jesus stressed the immediacy of the Kingdom of God. In the parables of Matthew, using concrete language and images from everyday life, he says that the kingdom of heaven is *present*; it is *here*, it is *here now* like seeds in a field. You can't see them, but they are there; like ground *pregnant* with seeds, the Kingdom of God is sown among us, and from it, love and compassion spring forth. The Kingdom of God is like leaven in bread. In a wad of dough, we don't see the yeast or leaven, but consider what happens to the dough because of it. It doubles or triples in size. The Kingdom of God is like treasure in a field; we don't see it because it is not superficial, but it is valuable beyond measure.

"The Kingdom of God," Jesus said, "is among you" (Luke 17:21).

For such a direct statement, this phrase has elicited much debate about its translation. The Greek phrase can mean either "the kingdom is *among* you, is *in your midst*, or is *within* you." However, because people looked around and saw turmoil, suffering and injustice, they could not believe this was true. So they *interpreted* the phrase to mean "the Kingdom of God is *near*" or "*at hand*," both of those phrases suggest that it is coming, but put it off in time; it will be here soon but not yet.

For two thousand years, traditional Christians have been waiting for the Kingdom of God to come. Quakers, I think, have known from the beginning that it is already here.

It is here.

It is now.

It is within each of us.

And we can choose to live in that kingdom.

Or we can choose to live in the kingdom of humanity—the world of power, wealth, possessions, competition, violence.

One phrase in the 1<sup>st</sup> Letter of John—“God is love”—succinctly expresses the way many of us understand goodness, whether or not we believe in God. “God is love,” wrote John, “and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them” (1 John 4:16). There is no separation from God. I am led to the next logical notion that if God *is* love, then Love is God, and the Kingdom of God must be the place where *Love* is ruler. If we live in love and compassion, we are living in the Kingdom of God.

The primary teaching of Jesus is that love and compassion lead to earthly happiness, higher spirituality, and a more conscious relationship with the Divine. Even if your body is sickly or starving, you can still be living in the Kingdom of God. To give you an example, I think of an American Baptist who went with his church to build a clinic for a Guatemalan village. He cried when he talked about how, out of his abundance, with all his knowledge and wealth and goods, he went to help the poor villagers, to give to them, but he discovered that he receive more than he gave. From their small supply, the villagers brought him food, sharing gladly and freely. They were open and loving, humble and kind. He lived in an earthly empire, but they lived in the Kingdom of God.

To end today, I would like to read Paul Alan Laughlin’s alternative to the Nicene Creed for those who find the remnants of Jesus’ teachings in the gospels more compelling than the traditional Christian focus on his death. The alternative goes like this:

*“We believe in the reign of God, and in the love, equality, justice and peace for which it stands; and in Jesus, who proclaimed, and enacted, and embodied its spirit,*

*and taught us all to live as God's children, and to help the poor and helpless and hopeless; and who died because the world was not ready for his message.”<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> Laughlin, p. 125.