

The “Creation” of Christ

Two weeks ago, I brought a message about the Phoenix Affirmations and the new direction of Christianity, i.e., progressive or emergent Christianity. Before I talk more about Christianity’s new direction, however, I would like to address the fact that many of us are uncomfortable with the old Christianity. Even though the Religious Society of Friends (Quakerism) was founded on Christian principles, more liberal Friends these days prefer to speak of spirituality in less specifically Christian terms. In fact, given the behavior and beliefs demonstrated by those who loudly proclaim to be “Christians,” many of us are reluctant to claim that label for ourselves. Though I am a follower of the teachings of Jesus, I cannot bring myself to say that I am Christian because of the current connotations of that word. I would be more willing to claim the name Jesus’ earliest fans used for themselves—“Followers of the Way”—or the name the earliest Friends chose for themselves—“Children of the Light.” Both of these names, notice, focus on what Jesus taught, i.e., “the Way” and “the Light,” while the label “Christianity” focuses on his person—what Jesus came to be called after he died.

In the past few years, New Testament scholars have distinguished between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith, that is, as theologian Paul Alan Laughlin explains in his book *Remedial Christianity: What Every Believer Should Know About the Faith but Probably Doesn’t*, between Jesus, “the human being who lived in first-century Palestine,” and Christ, “the object of religious devotion for subsequent generations of Christians.”¹

¹ Paul Alan Laughlin, *Remedial Christianity: What Every Believer Should Know About the Faith, but Probably Doesn’t*. Polebridge Press, 2000.

“Christ” is the Greek word for “Messiah,” which is the Hebrew word meaning “anointed one.” The “Christ of faith” linked in our minds with Jesus, as in “Jesus Christ” is a figure created primarily by Paul of Tarsus, whom Laughlin calls “the original theologian of Christianity.”² 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 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” (Laughlin 118).

To better understand all this, I’d like to play with time and space a bit, so we think about the phenomenon that became Christianity in slightly different terms.

Imagine the scenario this way. In 1950, in Loveland, Ohio, a son was born to a working class couple. Though his parents were simple, uneducated people, the boy showed great promise; even as a child he was a gifted speaker, expressing significant ideas in short, creative narratives; in addition, the boy seemed to be a prodigy in matters of spiritual understanding. The boy—let’s call him Joe—had no special training, but he exhibited a natural understanding of how people should live together. For a while, as a young man, he worked with his father in the family business, but eventually he became so well-known as a speaker that he left to devote all his time to preaching and teaching. He traveled widely in rural areas, sometimes speaking in private homes, sometimes in large tents set up for the purpose, or outside under the open sky. His hearers were for the most part, working class like his own family, and he taught acceptance of all people regardless of social status; in fact, he often showed preference for the poorest and most oppressed. His message stressed compassion for others and humility for oneself. He

² Ibid, p. 118.

practiced what he preached, insisting that he did nothing that others could not also do. His personal integrity and the truth in his teachings gained him devoted followers throughout southern Ohio where he lived and taught, though no one outside Ohio heard of him. Eventually Joe clashed with local authorities in Cincinnati who were troubled by the social changes his message advocated and the large crowds that followed him. In 1986, he was arrested, accused of complicity in a riot that resulted in the death of a policeman. On the second day of his trial, as he entered the courtroom one of his former followers shot and killed him. (It is important to the rest of the story that Joe died young, killed tragically and unjustly.) After their initial shock, his followers re-grouped, and, determined to keep his teachings alive, continued to spread his ideas.

Now imagine another young man born around 1960 in Cincinnati—let's call him Paul—who also grew up to be a preacher, but as a member of an organized religion, officially recognized and sanctioned. Paul had a degree from Yale Theological Seminary, and as a young minister in Wilmington, Ohio, he was gifted in the areas of church administration and marketing. He never actually met Joe, but he heard of him. Young Paul delivered many sermons denouncing him as a presumptuous upstart, saying extreme sorts of things, like “the man should be taken out and shot for the heresy he preaches.” After Joe's untimely death, deep feelings of guilt rose up in Paul, and one night in 1990, traveling on the road from Wilmington to Dayton with some companions, he had an experience that left him shaken and changed. Joe's spirit appeared in the car, sitting next to him in the back seat, and asked, point-blank, “Paul, why do you persecute me?” Immediately, Paul was struck blind and he remained so for quite some time.

This “Road to Dayton” experience changed Paul's life. He left his home and family, gave up his job as a minister, and searched out Joe's followers to talk with them.

They were, of course, suspicious of him because he had been such a vocal critic, but he told them about Joe appearing to him, and eventually they let him join them. After several years of meditating, Paul understood what had happened. The way Paul came to explain his encounter with Joe-after-death was that Joe was actually *God Himself*, who had taken human form—a form which certainly led to death, and in Joe’s case, a violent one. All of which meant that Joe—or God in the form of Joe—had died for him—Paul—but surely not just for him, surely for everyone else, too. And why? Paul’s answer: Because all humans are bad (“sinful” in church talk) and God required some compensation for his disappointment in us. In other words, someone had to pay (or atone) for humanity’s failings. So God took human form, that is, He “incarnated”—and died a violent death to pay off humanity’s accumulated debt to the Creator.

Paul spent the rest of his days traveling across the U.S., Mexico and Canada writing (mostly letters) and giving speeches about Joe, who died so undeservedly, but who came back to life. Paul took every opportunity to speak about Joe, and even appeared on local and regional talk shows. A skilled salesman and marketer, everywhere he went, Paul started small groups devoted to worshipping Joe, who was, he insisted, actually God. Paul never knew Joe when he was alive, and he never actually heard Joe speak, so though Paul did emphasize compassion and humility when he talked about Joe, he was more interested in Joe’s death and reappearance than in his teachings.

In the decades following Paul’s death, others built on what he had said about Joe incorporating some of what people remembered Joe had said, but always stressing the message from Paul about Joe as God-in-human form. Eventually, the national media picked up the story and it became a widespread and long-lasting spiritual phenomenon.

Though I took many liberties, the story of Joe and Paul is based *loosely* on the relationship between Jesus of Nazareth and Paul of Tarsus. Now, more seriously, here is Laughlin's description of Paul's influence on the development of what we know as Christianity, and how Jesus the man and teacher became Christ, the divine son of God.

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 (121).

And here is Paul's "created" Christ in his Letter to the Philippians (2:5-11):

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
 who, though he was in the form of God,
 did not regard equality with God
 as something to be exploited,
 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,
 being born in human likeness.
 And being found in human form,
 he humbled himself
 and became obedient to the point of death—
 even death on a cross.
 Therefore God also highly exalted him
 and gave him the name
 that is above every name,
 so that at the name of Jesus
 every knee should bend,
 in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
 and every tongue should confess
 that Jesus Christ is Lord,
 to the glory of God the Father.

For reasons I cannot fathom, Paul's explanation and "creation" of the Christ prevailed. In the following centuries, theologians focused on Paul's concepts and further complicated them. Because Christianity was illegal for most of the first three

centuries after it began, and because communication among the various Christian sects was limited, many different interpretations developed, so early Christianity was far from cohesive in its beliefs and interpretations.³ When the Emperor Constantine legitimized Christianity with the Edict of Milan in 312, Christians could meet and talk openly about what they believed. Doing so exposed the variety and disparity of interpretation among Christians, so in 325 CE, the emperor Constantine called a council of bishops to settle the matter. This meeting in Nicea resulted in what we know as the Nicene Creed, which is still widely used in Christian churches. Here it is—notice how the creed covers only *Jesus' birth and death*—nothing of his life and teachings.

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.

Laughlin offers an alternative creed for those who find the remnants of Jesus' teachings in the gospels more compelling than the focus on his death. "Some Christians," he writes, "might like to be in a congregation that affirmed their faith by saying:"

³ For an excellent explanation of all this, see the webpage of PBS television station WGBH at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/why/legitimization.html>

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.⁴

From the beginning, Quakers have interpreted Christianity much more like Laughlin's affirmation. Throughout his *Journal*, George Fox, the 17th century reformer and founder of what became Quakerism, stresses his understanding that Christ is the *Inner Teacher*, the Spirit of God or Light of God within each person that teaches us how to be whole and complete beings, and how to come into "right relationship" with each other and with God (which, by the way, is the early Quaker understanding of "salvation"⁵). For instance, Fox recounts that in 1652 he and other friends wrote "a paper to the priests and professors," (i.e., the preachers and those who *profess* to be Christians) declaring: "that Christ was come to teach people Himself, by His power and Spirit in their hearts, and to bring people off from all the world's ways and teachers, to His own free teaching. . . ."⁶

Later, to a large gathering of Friends in the churchyard at Sedbergh, Fox says, "I declared the everlasting truth of the Lord and the Word of life for several hours, showing that the Lord was come to *teach* His people Himself, and to bring them off from all the world's ways and teachers, to Christ, the true *teacher*, and the true way to God."⁷

A few days later, sitting atop a rock outside Firbank chapel in Westmoreland, Fox "declared God's everlasting truth and Word of life freely and largely for about the space of three hours." He says,

⁴ Laughlin, p. 125.

⁵ George Fox, *Journal*, p. 103: ". . . I was commanded to turn people to that inward Light, Spirit, and Grace, by which all might know their salvation and their way to God; even that Divine Spirit which would lead them into all truth, and which I infallibly knew would never deceive any."

⁶ Fox, p. 150.

⁷ Fox, p. 153.

I directed all to the Spirit of God in themselves; that they might be turned from darkness to Light, and believe in it; that they might become the children of it, and might be turned . . . unto God; and by the Spirit of truth might be led into all truth, and sensibly understand the words of the prophets, of Christ, and of the apostles; and might all come to know *Christ to be their teacher to instruct them*, their counselor to direct them, their shepherd to feed them, their bishop to oversee them, and their prophet to open divine mysteries to them (155)

Throughout the two millennia since the time of Christ, various groups (including Quakers) have resisted the organized churches' understanding of Christianity, trying instead to return to the original message taught by Rabbi Jesus. I believe this is happening again, through groups like those who wrote and espouse the Phoenix Affirmations. Next week, a third millennium paradigm shift in Christianity, the world's largest religion.