
WHO IS JESUS?

Focus

We call ourselves Christians acknowledging our approach to God, individual and communal, through the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. As we acknowledge that we come from many different Christian traditions, we note that our Christology may be very different from one person to the next. In this discussion we focus on the reality that we are a diverse people who have a wide range of understandings regarding just who Jesus of Nazareth was and who the Christ is and how Jesus is connected to the church that we understand to be the body of Christ in the world.

Some Centering Quotes about Jesus

“Who was Jesus? That disarmingly simple question is ... asked passionately by Christians – and non-Christians – of the most widely varying theological stances. While certainly not all of that interest is in touch with the academic quest for the historical Jesus, all who seek to answer the question have a vision of who Jesus was, whether that person is a television evangelist who talks about “JEE-sus” with every breath or is an Orthodox priest who almost shudders to say the name.”

(Walter F. Taylor, Jr., *New Quests for the Historical Jesus*)

“Jesus persists in veiling himself in indirect references and metaphors. ... It is almost as though Jesus were intent on making a riddle of himself. ... Whoever or whatever Jesus was, he was a complex figure, not easily subsumed under one theological rubric or sociological model.”

(John Meier, *Marginal Jew*)

“... For those of us who are Christians, we are all involved in an unending conversation about Jesus. It has gone on from the time of his first followers – a conversation that includes memory, testimony, significance, meaning, application, praise, prayer, and, of course, difference and conflict. The terms of this conversation change over time and from one cultural setting to another. ... How Christians think and talk about Jesus changes, even as there are some constants. Indeed, for Christians, the unending conversation about Jesus is the most important conversation there is. He is for us the decisive revelation of God – of what can be seen of God’s character and passion in a human life. There are other important conversations. But for followers of Jesus, the unending conversation about Jesus is the conversation that matters most.”

(Marcus Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*)

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“People say [that] Jesus is found in the Bible and the church. So many say it that I think it must be true, but for me the experience has not been one of finding him anywhere. For me, Bible and church, liturgy and creed, word and sacrament, have not served to facilitate a human quest through which we might recover Jesus and restore history. Rather, they have served to disclose a divine quest through which Jesus himself redeems history and recovers humanity. In short, I never once have felt as though I were finding Jesus in any of this, but I frequently feel as though I am being found. I think of the story that way: not as the place where I look for Jesus but as the place where he finds me.”

(Mark Allan Powell, *Jesus as a Figure in History*)

A Testimony About Jesus

Who Is Jesus?

Contributed by BK Hipsher

Having been raised the eldest daughter of a Southern Baptist preacher in the south during the 1960's and 1970's, my impulse is to answer this question with the well learned answer often rehearsed as a child, “Jesus Christ is the only son of God who died for my sins on a cross at Calvary and whom I acknowledge as my personal Lord and savior.” Having been received into the Episcopal Church in 1989, I am tempted to respond with portions of the Nicene Creed and answer, “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God....begotten, not made.... For us and for our salvation ... he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary....For our sake he was crucified... suffered death and was buried. On the Third day he rose again.... he ascended into heaven... He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.” Having studied many of the great feminist and queer theologians and as an unapologetic student of Carter Heyward and Virginia Mollenkott, I might answer, “Jesus was the man who showed us what it was like to live a human life as the incarnate Christ present on earth, teaching us what it means to really love each other.” And from my close association with Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism, I might answer that Jesus embodied a unique and particular prophetic presence as a human being, showing us what it means to live a human life always giving priority to the expression of God's love for creation.

It is important for me to acknowledge that all of these answers have been and on some level continue to be true for me, simultaneously. And, logically, if this diverse collection of answers is true for me, then how much more diverse are our collective answers to the question, “Who is Jesus?”

Holy Conversations: Exploring My and Our Understanding of Jesus

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): Who is Jesus for you? How has that understanding changed over the course of your life?

Points of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): What are the images of Jesus that come into focus as we discuss our personal answers to the question, “Who is Jesus?” Was there anything in your small group discussion discomfiting, challenging, or threatening to you?

Additional Thoughts About Who Jesus Is

MCC Stories, Our Stories

“I identify with Jesus as the radical liberator, as the one who liberates humanity and the earth from the bonds of oppressive forces. He shows us the example of brotherhood, of love, of service so that we can all be free to be all we are created to be. He is someone who is human and divine and who liberates me from demonic forces and those forces are what motivate people to oppress others.”

“Jesus Christ is the only Son of God who died for my sins.”

“Jesus is the human male who modeled for us transgressing gender, doing transforming acts, transcending the dominant culture norms to show us a queer vision of humanity transporting us to an understanding that we are called to do the same.”

“Jesus Christ is my personal savior.”

“Jesus is the pattern or model of how we are supposed to live our lives in the world.”

“Jesus is our brother.”

“Jesus is God incarnate.”

“The historical figure Jesus cannot be reconstructed from the records we have. Very few sources other than sacred texts can corroborate the existence of an individual man called Jesus who lived in first century Palestine and did great deeds.”

These are some actual quotes from people who identify as MCC. They show in a microcosm how diverse our answers are to the question. And as we unpack the question “Who is Jesus?” we must decide if we are going to include the concept of the Christ. Some of us assume that the human baby Jesus was as much the Christ as the man who was crucified. Some of us believe that the Christ pre-dated the man Jesus and existed from before the beginning of creation. Some of us believe that the work of salvation was accomplished when Jesus died on the cross and in that act he proved that he is the Christ. Some of us believe that the resurrection is the defining moment affirming Jesus as the Christ. Some of us believe that the church is the body of Christ in the world and tasked with completing the work of salvation by working for justice. Some of us believe that Jesus died but that the Christ arose. Some of us believe that we are all children of God not favoring an image of Jesus as the only Son of God. And some of us believe that the Christ is within all of us even inhabiting the space between us, knitting us all together into one family.

Additional Quotes About Jesus

“Jesus was divine in the same way we all are – together, in mutual relation with our sisters and brothers. No one of us alone is ‘God.’ God is the Holy Spirit connecting our lives, moving with us and through us. God is our Sacred power for healing and liberation. God was Jesus’ sacred power as well. ... Jesus seems to have been rooted deeply in a commitment to Spirit that he experienced as available to everyone; a God who cared more about people’s well-being than propriety, customs, or laws; a Source of social and personal transformation; a Wellspring of liberation and healing, judgment, and forgiveness. Jesus’s historical

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significance – his Christic, or redemptive, meanings – originated in his faith in the power that he experienced in relation to sisters and brothers. ...

I believe that the ‘something special’ about Jesus was his *passion*: the fullness of his embodied life, the depth and power of his embodied spirit, the openness of his body to risk and struggle in the spirit of God.”
(Carter Heyward, *Saving Jesus from Those Who are Right*)

“Womanist theology begins with the experiences of Black women as its point of departure. ... Black women must do theology out of their tri-dimensional experience of racism/sexism/classism. To ignore any aspect of this experience is to deny the holistic and integrated reality of Black womanhood. ... with Jesus Christ, there was an implied universality which made him identify with others – the poor, the woman, the stranger. To affirm Jesus’ solidarity with the ‘least of the people’ is not an exercise in romanticized contentment with one’s oppressed status in life. For as the Resurrection signified that there is more to life than the cross for Jesus Christ, for Black women it signifies that their tri-dimensional oppressive existence is not the end, but it merely represents the context in which a particular people struggle to experience hope and liberation.” (Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus*)

“The recovery of the dangerous queer memories of Jesus and his sexuality transforms my Christian practice into a new and dangerous memory. As I retrieve the historical Jesus, I discover an activist advocating an egalitarian vision of God’s reign. Jesus was just as dangerous to the hierarchical, exclusive, privileged, and gendered network of religious/political relations of power in first-century Palestine as twenty-first-century queers and ACT UP are to the Catholic hierarchy. ...

The Queer Christ is an attempt to construct a christological discourse that interprets Jesus’ embodied practices in a positive, queer-affirming theological discourse. To say Jesus the Christ is queer is to say that God identifies with us and our experience of injustice. God experiences the stereotypes, the labeling, the hate crimes, the homophobic violence directed against us. ... If Jesus the Christ is not queer, then his *basileia* (reign of God) message of solidarity and justice is irrelevant. If the Christ is not queer, then the incarnation has no meaning for our sexuality. It is the particularity of Jesus *the* Christ, his particular identification with the sexually oppressed, that enables us to understand Christ as black, queer, female, Asian, African, a South American peasant, a Jewish transsexual, and so forth.”
(Robert E. Goss, *Queering Christ*)

Biblical Passages About Jesus

Matthew 1:18-25	Mark 7:24-30
Matthew 3:11-4:4	Mark 8: 27-33
Matthew 9:1-7	Mark 9:11-13
Matthew 9:27-31	Mark 10:46-52
Matthew 9:35-36	Mark 14:18-21
Matthew 15:23-28	Mark 16:1-11
Matthew 16:15-25	Luke 2:1-7
Matthew 17:4-14	Luke 5:17-26
Matthew 26:26-29	Luke 9: 18-22
Matthew 26:59-68	Luke 22:21-23
Matthew 27:41-51	Luke 24:1-12
Matthew 28:1-20	John 13:21-30
Mark 1:7-8	John 20: 1-18
Mark 2:1-12	

Holy Conversations: Seeking, Sharing and Stretching

Point of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): How can we maintain our own integrity about who Jesus is for us while making room for others' views that sometimes diverge greatly from our own?

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): What part do the creeds play in our mutual respect for diversity of understanding with regard to Jesus and the concept of the Christ?

Point of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): Christology is central to our theology as Christians. What does it mean for us as MCC to keep listening to each other when we do not agree or understand each other's Christological focus or understanding of the answer to the question, "Who is Jesus?"

Points of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): What do we risk as a denomination if we insist on making room for a variety of opinions and ideas about Jesus and the concept of the Christic presence in the world? What do we gain?

Pulling it All Together: Reflections About Jesus

No matter what our particular or varied views on Jesus, we all gather around the gospel stories of the life and work of Jesus in the world. As we consider the many ways we can answer the question "Who is Jesus?" we must wrestle with the fact that we have an incarnational theology. We believe that God is somehow made known here on earth among us in human form. That reality has enormous implications for us as human beings. If the life of Jesus is important to our understanding of incarnation and what it means to be a Christian, then we must come to terms with what it means to be ourselves, the unique, beloved child of God that we were created to be. One of the great teachings of Jesus is referred to as the Great Commandment: Love your neighbor as yourself. In an incarnational theology we must come to terms with loving ourselves in all our diversity before we can begin to learn to love our neighbor. Because implied in this teaching is the idea that we can only love another as much as we have learned to love ourselves, our own particular incarnation of Christ in the world.

Ritual Suggestions

Have the group write their own creed, inclusive of everyone's perspective without trying to reconcile it. Once the creed is written, have everyone recite it together. (Hint: the phrase "We believe" can indicate that even if all of us do not subscribe to a particular belief, together, "we" (or some of us) might.)

Another option: Build a group collage by having everyone contribute a picture that represents the image of Christ in themselves. Each person would share about their picture before adding it to the collage.

Additional Resources

Borg, Marcus. *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006.

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