

# JESUS & CONFLICTED CHRISTIANITY

We each have our own personal image or metaphor for Jesus. To some, he is the great shepherd. To others, the son of God or maybe son of man. Or how about the way, the truth and the life? The word? The teacher, healer? The Christ? The king of the Jews?

Without discounting any of these possibilities, we offer yet another alternative – Jesus as the first and last of the Christian heretics.

What is meant by heresy? Very simply, articulating a belief and practice in opposition to the orthodoxy of the day, Jesus delivered a message that was uncomfortable to the ruling elite of his day. For this, he was executed. Even today, 20 centuries later, Jesus points to a path, a way of life we are inclined to avoid or ignore.

What was Jesus' heresy? Very simply, *the heresy of Jesus was and is conflicted Christianity*. On these six pages, we outline this alternative view of Jesus.

For a few moments, keep an open mind. Prepare to be challenged.

***Conflicted Christianity:*** Our primary thesis is this -- *Jesus intended conflict*. After all, it was Jesus who pointedly declared: "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" In short, the conflicts are there because Jesus wanted it that way.

This was the god-man who desired that we be fully immersed in the turmoil. And there is a purpose – that we wrestle with the contradictions, draw new understanding synthesized for changing times, and apply the understanding in the here and now of our daily lives.

When we fail to grasp the message, we miss the full wonders of God's kingdom – the kingdom that is here among us now. Now, for more of the particulars.

***Who Was Jesus?*** We know nothing about Jesus except from what others have written about him. Jesus left no CD disc, no videotape, no writings, not even a drawing of his likeness.

No New Testament (or secular) writer of the first two centuries AD approached the task of reporting Jesus' ministry in a fully objective fashion. Each was telling his (or her) own story. Each put their own spin on the message – by choosing specific incidents (and words) to include or exclude.

So, is it really possible to strip back the accretions of time and tradition and find the real historic Jesus? The answer is both yes and no.

***The Tradition of the Historic Jesus:*** The essentials of the historical Jesus can be gleaned from a variety of both historical and credal documents passed down through two millennia. Consider first the creed formulated under the direct supervision of the Roman emperor Constantine at the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD:

We believe in ..... *One Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God* .... who for us men and for our salvation, came down and was made flesh, and became man, suffered, and rose on the third day, ascended into the heavens ....”

When it comes to the historical Jesus, this first credal formulation is very simple. Jesus was the son of God, became human, died, was resurrected, and ascended to heaven.

Now consider a different formulation, ostensibly from a more dispassionate source, that of the first century Jewish military leader and historian Josephus:

Now, there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works – *a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure*. He drew over many to him both many of the Jews, and many of the Gentiles. He was [the] Christ; and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him, for he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him; and the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.

The essentials as recounted by Josephus parallel those of the Nicene Creed in several key respects. Jesus was an actual human, died on a cross, and reappeared. Josephus also calls Jesus a doer of wonderful works (miracles?), a teacher, and as the source for a movement involving people known as Christians.

Jesus also is mentioned as an historical figure by two Roman figures of the first and early second centuries – historian Tacitus and politician Pliny the Younger. Neither could be considered as friends of the nascent Christian movement.

Beyond these early, cryptic formulations, most of what can be gleaned Jesus’ life is found in the four Gospels of the New Testament. The apostle Paul provides few clues in his writings about Jesus’ life – describing only selected events surrounding his death and resurrection. Other early information is available from non-canonical sources of the first two centuries.

## **CONFLICTED CHRISTIANITY**

For two millennia, theological and doctrinal debates over the life, teachings and actions of Jesus has been predicated on the notion that there is but *one truth*. Where there may appear to be two conflicting statements, orthodoxy demands that truth must be reconciled through *harmonization*.

Seeming contradictions are to always be reconciled, no matter how bizarre the explanation. The contradictions may be of two types: (a) internal inconsistencies noted within the account of a single author; and (b) between different authors.

**Conflicts Within Gospel Accounts:** Conflicts between gospel accounts are more often noted than those conflicts internalized within a single New Testament gospel. Yet it is these internal conflicts that are of most interest – because they seemingly portray Jesus at war with himself.

Virtually all of the New Testament gospels and some of the non-canonical writings provide vivid examples of a *conflicted Jesus*. In the *Gospel of Mark* alone, at least 15 different sets of conflicting statements attributed to Jesus can be found. As an example, speaking to a rich man, Jesus invokes the Mosaic commandment to:

*“Honor your father and mother.”*

Yet, just moments later, Jesus admonishes Peter his disciple:

*“Truly, I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age – houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions – and in the age to come eternal life.”*

Another example is presented by Matthew’s gospel (and also in slightly different form by Mark). Here, Jesus flip-flops on the question of whether to accept and heal a non-Jew. Matthew’s story is worth recounting in its entirety:

Jesus left that place (Gennesaret) and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” He answered, “I was sent *only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*”

But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” She said, “Yes, Lord, yet *even the dogs eat the crumbs* that fall from their masters’ table.” Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, *great is your faith!* Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

Why did Jesus change his mind and help the woman? One interpretation is that he was testing to see how badly she wanted healing. A second explanation could be that he was persuaded by the strength of her logic. A third and related explanation would be that Jesus was confronted by his own prejudicial attitudes to non-Jews.

He was confused by the contradiction between his belief and her assertion, leading Jesus to repent of his own xenophobia. So, no matter what the explanation, here is a picture of Jesus potentially who is either disingenuous or conflicted by his own personal beliefs and emotions.

**Conflicts Between Gospel Accounts:** Conflicts between gospel accounts have been more widely cited – particularly different chronologies of Jesus’ ministry provided by the four gospel writers.

An example of a doctrinal conflict is most simply illustrated by Matthew's "Blessed are the poor *in spirit*" versus Luke's more abbreviated "Blessed are the poor."

So, is Jesus' blessing directed at those who are poor in material possessions or poor in spirit? In this case, the answer seems to depend on who is telling the story.

Throughout his gospel, Luke places special priority on assistance to the poor. Mark takes a different tack, quoting Jesus as saying: "For you always have the poor with you, *and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish*, but you will always have me." Matthew has Jesus making the same statement, only a bit more hard hitting by deleting the *italicized* phrase noted above. In his account of this same incident of the anointing of Jesus, Luke avoids the entire comment about the inevitability of poverty.

John's gospel takes a tack similar to Matthew, but adds a parenthetical note that Judas Iscariot had raised the question "not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it." So John lets Jesus make the tough statement, but then excuses it with this aside about the betrayer to his readers.

In short, the gospel writers consistently portray Jesus differently in terms of theology, politics and humanity. Is this simply because each writer is injecting his own unique bias or *spin* into the account?

Or could these differences also reflect genuinely different faces of the same Son of Man? A rabbi who could be both *hard and soft*, who preached both a personal and social gospel.

The answer may be both neither and both. Each gospel writer sought to explain this conflicted Jesus in terms that would be understandable to the intended audience. It is not surprising that each author would find a different means to fit his particular angle on the meaning of this unique ministry.

***Non-Canonical Gospels:*** As we turn to accounts outside the generally accepted New Testament, some writers offer relatively cohesive pictures. Others present a collage of what may include more discordant elements. This is especially true of the Gospel of Thomas.

For example, the Jesus of Thomas also sends mixed signals about the priority placed on reconciliation with those believers who fall by the wayside. In strong language unique to this non-canonical gospel, Jesus is quoted as saying: ""Damn the Pharisees! They are like a dog sleeping in the cattle manger: the dog neither eats nor [lets] the cattle eat."

But, this is the same Jesus who can tell the parable of the lost sheep with a straight face: "The Kingdom is like a shepherd who had a hundred sheep. One of them, the largest, went astray. He left the ninety-nine and looked for the one until he found it. After he had toiled, he said to the sheep, *'I love you more than the ninety-nine.'*"

## CONTRADICTIONARY ACTIONS OF JESUS

With the exception of Mark, the four gospels of the New Testament canon devote the majority of their respective narratives to the *words* of Jesus. But, as the colloquialism goes, “actions speak louder than words.” And so, we turn to the actions of Jesus. Do they show a pattern of conflicted behavior that corresponds with his spoken statements? The answer is a decided yes. Look at the earthly record of an individual who:

- Walked away from his parents at age twelve but at age 33 made sure to entrust his mother into the care of a beloved disciple.
- Drove the money changers from the temple with a whip and then submitted days later to Jewish and Roman authorities without any resistance.
- Encouraged children but cursed a fig tree.
- Could command center stage with a Sermon on the Mount but yet slip through a crowd ready to stone him.
- Repulsed a gentile woman seeking healing, but then relented after she persisted.
- Performed healing and natural miracles in both urban and rural venues, but not in his own home town (of Nazareth).
- Deliberately set his face to Jerusalem and the accompanying expectation of death but then asked Father God to reverse this course of action.

Some might suggest that these are contradictions in appearance only. Seemingly conflicting events actually hide deeper meaning – and so really represent a consistent manifestation of Jesus’ holy nature. For example, Jesus driving the money-changers from the temple represents a righteous anger appropriate for this event but not for Jesus’ later arrest and trial. At the trial, the divine imperative for submittal to the foreordained outcome of crucifixion comes to outweigh any consideration of an angry response.

But then, how does one explain Jesus’ ability to work miracles everywhere but Nazareth? Was he simply too nervous to do the miracle thing around those who had known him since childhood? Or was he *unmasked* by those who knew the real Jesus and judged him a charlatan?

## WHY ALL THE CONTRADICTION?

Are the contradictions real or only apparent? Are they to be explained away, to be *harmonized*, as has been the goal of mainstream Christian theologians since the first century. What if these efforts to “make sense of it all” are missing the real message? A message with three parts:

*1. While early New Testament era authors each gave their own spin to Jesus’ life, the reported conflicts reflect something far deeper – contradictory statements and actions by the historical Jesus himself. Conflict and contradiction run throughout Jesus’ ministry – both in word and deed. Early Christian writers felt compelled to report at least some of the major conflicts as they occurred – because Jesus actions and his teachings simply could not be explained otherwise.*

2. *Jesus intentionally set up situations of conflict and contradiction.* The gospel text gives clear clues that Jesus intentionally set up conflict, purposefully making those around him uncomfortable. After all, it was Jesus who deliberately refused to see his mother, brothers and sisters when they traveled to see him. And it is Jesus who says that he speaks in parables – specifically so that his listeners will not understand his message.

3. *We can never fully experience the kingdom without living through the contradictions -- both individually and collectively.* This statement involves the greatest leap from the Jesus of the New Testament to the Jesus of today. Jesus is making his listener – then and now – reach for understanding.

The Jesus of Matthew puts it this way: “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you *will find*; knock, and it will be opened to you.” The non-canonical Gospel of Thomas etches the words of Jesus in even bolder relief: “Those who seek should not stop seeking *until they find*. When they find, they will be disturbed. When they are disturbed, they will marvel, and will rule over all.”

## **SO, WHO IS JESUS?**

Jesus has been portrayed in countless ways over 20+ centuries – in forms ranging from the written word to artistic renditions. He is shown as the gentle shepherd, the embracer of children, the suffering Messiah and, yes, as the scourge of the sellers at the Temple.

These images typically convey a single theme, a simple agenda. They sketch a Jesus of purpose, often of single-minded intent. Too seldom are the complexities – or the internal conflicts – of this man/god adequately captured in a single portrait.

It is this ambiguity that made it so difficult for his disciples to answer the question: “Who do you say that I am?” Yet it is the underlying conflict within the man that continues to perplex even those who have come some twenty centuries later. For most, the objective has been to smooth out the rough edges, to “harmonize” the gospels.

Yet, the question has been posed: what if these efforts to “make sense of it all” are missing the real message? That this is a Jesus of deliberate, often bewildering conflict.

As Jesus lived in and through conflict, he requests as much of those who follow behind. We are asked to work out our salvation via conflict – both personal and familial. So that, like the pagan, Canaanite woman who was rebuked by Jesus, we persist until the master relents, saying: “Let it be done for you as you wish.”

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This passage is adapted from the chapter “The Heresy of Jesus: Conflicted Christianity,” the last heresy detailed in the approximately 360 page book *12 Heresies of Christianity*. For more, check out [www.jesustheheresy.com](http://www.jesustheheresy.com)