

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Number:	13		Gary L.W. Johnson
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CONFESSING CHRIST: WHICH ONE?

Marcus Borg is a highly-acclaimed New Testament scholar (and a member of the notorious *Jesus Seminar*) who openly admits that he does *not* believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ or that Christ ascended bodily into heaven. In fact, Borg does not believe that Jesus ever claimed to be The Messiah, and Jesus most certainly did not believe His death on the cross would secure for his followers the forgiveness of sins. Borg, in his book with the curious title, *Meeting Jesus Again For the First Time*, contends that Jesus “was a spirit person, subversive sage, social prophet, and movement founder who invited his followers and hearers into a transforming relationship with the same Spirit that he himself knew, and into a community whose social vision was shaped by the core value of compassion” (p. 119). By “spirit person,” Borg believes that Jesus was a “mediator of the sacred” for whom the Spirit of God was a reality that was experienced. Based on his experience of the sacred, for the historical Jesus *compassion* “was the central quality of God and the central moral quality of a life centered in God” (p. 46).¹ Needless to say, Borg has no room in his belief system for the Christ of the early Church creeds. Borg’s views on Jesus, however; do find an historical precedent in what was known as *Adoptionism* [see page 4 of Sermon Notes], an early church heresy that reduces the essential significance of Jesus Christ to an “example” for his followers to obey. Those who so do will be similarly rewarded with “Sonship” and divine acceptance. Adoptionism makes of Christianity a religion of control rather than a religion of redemption and reduces morals to Moralism. Christianity becomes a grim striving for a goal never to be reached and is preoccupied with symptoms of sin rather than an attempt to treat the human condition that produces sins.² Strictly speaking, the Church Fathers, the Reformers, the Westminster divines, the Princetonians, (like Charles Hodge, B. B. Warfield), the great Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon, and *most* Christians who claim to be orthodox in any meaningful sense of the word would not consider Borg’s beliefs to be remotely “Christian.” But noted “evangelical” New Testament scholar N.T. Wright (who is a personal friend of Borg) does. Wright recently said, “Marcus Borg really does not believe Jesus Christ was bodily raised from the dead. But I know Marcus well: he loves Jesus and believes in him passionately. The philosophical and cultural world he has lived in has made it very, very difficult for him to believe in the bodily resurrection. I actually think that’s a major problem and it affects most of whatever else he does, and I think that it means he has all sorts of flaws as a teacher, but I don’t want to say he isn’t a Christian.”³

What the early Church Fathers or the Reformers or N. T. Wright think about Marcus Borg’s theology is not in the final analysis, what really matters. Rather, what does the New Testament have to say about Borg’s “confession of faith?” Does the New Testament permit “philosophical and cultural” factors to allow us to pick and choose what we like and dislike about the Christ of Scripture? There is a memorable scene in the movie *The Untouchables*, where Kevin Costner (Elliot Ness) and Sean Connery (a Chicago street cop) are kneeling in a sanctuary of a large church. They are discussing how to go about getting Al Capone. Sean Connery, the seasoned beat-cop, is laying it on the level in terms of what it will cost to get Capone. He says to Elliot Ness, “Well, you know the

Lord hates a coward.” Does God hate cowardice? In one particular sense He most certainly does, and Jesus’ words as recorded in the New Testament Gospels tell us why.

- I. **THE NATURE OF CONFESSION.** We are examining what it means to *confess* faith in Christ. There are a number of references in the New Testament that speak of publicly confessing a saving attachment to Christ (cf. Matthew 10:32; John 12:42; 1 John 2:23; 4:2,3,15). This does not simply refer to mouthing certain words -- Judas could have done that.⁴The Greek verb *homologeō*, along with its strengthened form *exhomologeō*, the noun *homologia* and the adverbial *homologoumenos* mean “to speak the same together” or “to agree with or avow.” It involves making public what is inside oneself, so that all may share.⁵The word is sometimes used *generally* of revealing one’s intent (cf. Matthew 7:23) or consent as by general agreement (cf. I Timothy 3:16). It may come as something of a surprise to learn that there are only four references to *confessing* or *declaring* our sins (Matthew 3:6 and the parallel passage in Mark 1:5; Acts 19:18; James 5:16 and, of course, 1 John 1:9). This is not to say that this kind of confession is unimportant, but as Moulton has written, “the Christian life is not centered round confession of sin; it is centered round confessional faith in Christ. This is where the main New Testament lesson lies.”⁶*Confession of faith* always centers on Christ. This is done openly and as an expression of faith (Romans 10:9-10). This public declaration *always* is associated with certain distinctive beliefs (cf. Hebrews 3:1; 4:14; 10:23; 1 Timothy 6:12). The final sense in which confession is used is in reference to *praising God*. This is Paul’s point in Romans 14:11 and 15:9. The writer to the Hebrews echoes this same theme in 13:15. We are called upon to *publicly* confess a saving attachment to Christ. This is both a *duty* and a *privilege*. “To follow Jesus still seems often like entering on an unknown and perilous way. Therefore the need of open, positive, avowed, committed, consecrated faith is as great as ever.”⁷
- II. **THE OBJECT OF CONFESSION.** “Whosoever shall confess Me.” Jesus has been exhorting His disciples not to fear men but to trust God, and this trust will be demonstrated in confessing Christ. Writing in a period when the same kind of liberal scholarship as advanced by Marcus Borg threatened to obscure the message of the cross, J. Gresham Machen took pen in hand and wrote these words about the nature of true confession: “In order, therefore, that the purity of the Church may be preserved, a confession of faith in Christ must be required of all those who would become Church members. But what kind of confession must it be? I for my part think that it ought to be not merely a verbal confession, but a credible confession. One of the very greatest evils of present-day religious life, it seems to me, is the reception into the church of persons who merely repeat a form of word such as, ‘I accept Christ as my personal Savior,’ without giving the slightest evidence to show that they know what such words mean. As a consequence of this practice, hosts of persons are being received into the Church on the basis, as has been well-said, of nothing more than a vague admiration for the moral character of Jesus, or else on the basis of a vague purpose of engaging in humanitarian work. One such person within the Church does more harm to the cause of Christ, I for my part believe, than ten such persons outside; and the whole practice ought to be radically changed. The truth is that the ecclesiastical currency in our day has been sadly debased; church membership, as well as Church office, no longer means what it ought to mean. In view of such a situation, we ought, I think, to have reality at least; instead of comforting ourselves with columns of church statistics, we ought to face the facts; we ought to recall this paper currency and get back to a standard of gold.”⁸
- III. **THE MANNER OF CONFESSION.** This is to be done “before men,” i.e., publicly. Confession is the genuine fruit of faith. Why is this important? After all, as we are frequently told, religious faith is intensely personal and private. Keep it to yourself, is the

advice often given. But Jesus demands otherwise. He calls for open allegiance. He calls for faith being demonstrated or exhibited in every circumstance of life.⁹ In 2 Timothy 2:19, the Apostle Paul declares, “Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness.” We must not only positively identify ourselves with Christ, we must likewise manifest and avoid anything that would bring the name of Christ in disrepute.

IV. **THE CONSEQUENCES OF CONFESSION.** “Whosoever shall confess me before men, him shall the Son of man confess before the angels of God.”¹⁰ Please note that Jesus gives no allowance for those who choose to take a so-called middle-of-the-road position. “Jesus makes the entire position of men in the world to come, whether for weal or woe, to depend upon their relationship to and attitude toward him in this present world. Is this a claim which any mere man might have made? Do we not encounter here essentially the exclusiveness of Acts 4:12, ‘And in none other is there salvation; for neither is there any other name under heaven, that is given among men, wherein we must be saved?’ And thus we also hear Jesus speaking with unqualified sovereign authority and self-assurance: ‘Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart; and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light’ (Matthew 11:28-30).”¹¹

CONCLUSION: The Lord Jesus expects His followers to declare their allegiance to Him openly and without shame, and without complaining that they need to adjust their beliefs about Him because of discomfiting “philosophical and cultural” factors that prove an embarrassment to our age. A faith that refuses to acknowledge Him is as worthless as a confession that is insincere. It is at this point that we turn again to the *Jesus* of Marcus Borg. Like the *Jesus* of Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*, and the *Jesus* of *The Gospel of Judas*, Borg’s *Jesus* is not the *real* Jesus. In the words of Andreas Kostenberger, “The Jesus of popular imagination and of sub-Christian pedigree is an emaciated Jesus who lacks the power to save. He is a domesticated Jesus who is cut down to the size of the person who wants, not a Savior, but a moral example, an inspirational, non-threatening figure à la ‘Book of Daniel’ (the recent TV sitcom that was short-lived) rather than a Lord who compels obedience and commitment in discipleship. Neither is the Bible of those who would erode the canon the same Bible as the Bible of the early church or the orthodox, historic, biblical church of the ages. . . . The explosive, subversive character of true, biblical Christianity comes from the exclusive claim of Jesus, propagated by the early Christians, that there is no other way of salvation but Jesus (Acts 4:12), that, in Dan Brown’s words, ‘all those who do not accept Christ as their personal savior are doomed to hell,’ and Jesus did in fact rise from the dead as the one crucified by men but vindicated and exalted by God. This truth, and this news, is not merely of private import; it is public, universal, and calls for a response from every individual. Jesus, and the gospel of salvation in him and him alone, is the one and only standard by which people will be judged. There are not many equally legitimate personal ‘paths of spiritual enlightenment’ people may choose, but one divinely mandated path equally open to all, but one nevertheless of God’s, rather than man’s choosing, centered on Christ and on the cross.”¹² In confessing Christ, we are confessing our own sinfulness and the need for His atoning sacrifice on our behalf. In confessing Christ, we are confessing our spiritual poverty, need and helplessness. But we are also confessing His great power to save to the uttermost all who call upon His name. The New Testament knows nothing of a hidden or secret Christian faith. Actions, we are often reminded, speak louder than words. This confession is first demonstrated in baptism and in identification with the household of faith.

ENDNOTES

¹M. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again For the first Time* (Harper, 1995).

²cf. the excellent book by C. FitzSimons Allison, *The Cruelty of Heresy* (Morehouse, 1994), p. 32.

³N. T. Wright interview with *The Australian* (April 13, 2006).

⁴D. A. Carson provides some helpful analysis of how the slogan “Jesus is Lord” is practically useless unless it is framed in a specific Biblical, theological worldview that takes in a personal/transcendent God, the revelation of the Scripture, and most importantly, an understanding of who Jesus is. See his *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Zondervan, 1996), pp. 99-100.

⁵cf. Harold K. Moulton, *The challenge of the concordance: Some New Testament Words Studied in Depth* (Bagster, 1977), p. 113.

⁶Ibid. p. 114.

⁷G. T. Purves, *The Sinless Christ* (Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1902), p. 50.

⁸J. G. Machen, *What Is Faith?* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1979), p. 155. Machen wrote during the early decades of the 20th century.

⁹Listen to the wise words of John Calvin: “As to the where, when, how often, in what way, and to what extent, we are to confess our faith, this is difficult to refine with any exact rule, but we must look to the occasion, that none of our people fail in his calling in his time. We must ask the Lord, the Spirit of discursion and fortitude, and with His direction we shall know what is expedient, and boldly carry through what we are sure is laid upon us.” *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries I* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1972), p. 309.

¹⁰Literally this reads, “Who shall confess in Me (*homologēsei en emoi*) . . . in him will I also confess (*homologēsō kagō en autō*). The use of the preposition *en* is in keeping with the Aramaic, cf. J. H. Moulton, *A Grammar of the New Testament Greek II* (T & T Clark, 1976), p. 463.

¹¹N. B. Stonehouse, *Origins of the Synoptic Gospels: Some Basic Questions* (rpt. Baker, 1979), p. 190.

¹²A. Kostenberger, “The Da Vinci Code” A Myth of Christian Origins,” *Reformation 21 Online.org* (April 10, 2006).

EARLY CHURCH HERESIES

- Adoptionists** (also known as Monarchianism) said, Jesus became the Christ. His Sonship was earned, thus he was adopted by God the Father.
- Arians** said, Jesus Christ is Son of God, He is of like substance, not the same substance with the Father. He is the first created being – therefore not co-equal with the Father.
- Docetists** said, Christ only appeared to be human. He did not have a real body of flesh and blood.
- Nestorians** said, He was Man and God – therefore He was two Persons. Christ is depicted as a God-bearing man, not in an organic union (God-man) but merely in a mechanical fashion.
- Apollinarians** said, He was not two Persons – therefore not perfect Man and perfect God.
- Eutychians** said, He was only one Person – therefore he had only one Nature.
- Monothelites** said, He was only one Person – therefore He could have only one Will.
- Macedonians** said, The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Father – therefore He is not a Person distinct from the Father.
- Sabellians** said, God is One – therefore He cannot be Three. He simply manifested Himself differently.
- Manicheans** said, Evil is not derived from God – therefore it must be an original substance independent of Him (dualism).
- Gnostics** said, The Deity is infinite – He cannot really assume a finite body. The material is evil.