

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Easter Messages		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	1		Gary L.W. Johnson
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WHY THE OPEN HOSTILITY?

Ah, springtime. Flowers blooming, birds singing, and articles questioning the historicity of Jesus hitting the newsstands.

“The insurance company Geico has done a lot of funny commercials, but our editor at BreakPoint has a favorite. A group of teenagers are running through a dark forest being chased by a killer. After debating whether to hide in the basement, the attic, or make a quick getaway in the nearby running car, they decide to hide behind dozens of chainsaws dangling from a barn door. ‘When you’re in a horror movie, you make poor decisions,’ says the narrator. ‘It’s what you do.’ And this week I found myself paraphrasing: ‘When you’re CNN, you publish annual articles suggesting Jesus never existed. It’s what you do.’

“Every year around March and December, this and other outlets exhume the long-dead thesis that the New Testament is based on a mythological figure, not a Man who really lived, died, and rose from the grave two thousand years ago. This year, CNN even *republished* an article (<http://www.cnn.com/2017/02/15/living/jesus-debate-man-versus-myth/>) from 2012 at CNN.com In the piece, entitled “Decoding Jesus: Separating Man from Myth,” John Blake suggests that Christ’s historical existence is an open question. CNN featured it at the top of their homepage as part of the push for their new series, “Finding Jesus: Faith, Fact, Forgery.” (<http://www.cnn.com/shows/finding-jesus>).

“Blake quotes the likes of Timothy Freke, author of ‘Jesus Mysteries’ and former Baptist pastor Robert Price, author of ‘Deconstructing Jesus,’ who both claim that the Gospels are forgeries or misunderstood allegories, and that the story of Jesus was copied from legends about pagan deities. ‘In the age of the Internet and self-publishing,’ writes Blake, ‘these arguments have gained enough traction that some of the world’s leading New Testament scholars feel compelled to publicly take them on.’

“Now let me be clear: This is the very definition of fake news: No credible historian believes Jesus is a myth. Even among skeptics of religion, that theory has been abandoned. None other than Bart Ehrman, the agnostic biblical scholar and fierce critic of the New Testament, calls Jesus-deniers Internet conspiracy theorists trying to sell books, and compares them to Holocaust-deniers.

“Dominic Crossan, another scholar who would never pass for an evangelical apologist, says he’s ‘certain’ that Christ existed, and chalks up alternative theories to disdain for the Prince of Peace. Keep in mind, neither Ehrman or Crosson would affirm anything historically Christian, such as that Jesus was not just a man but God – that He performed miracles, died for the sins of the world, and rose from the dead for our justification. But if anything, this fact makes their agreement on His

existence even *more* powerful, not less.

“On this issue, they represent the broad consensus among scholars that Christianity began with the life and death of a real and extraordinary man. Of course, we Christians don’t believe that’s all there was to it. But when our neighbors tell us over the backyard fence that they’ve watched a documentary or read an article claiming Jesus is a myth, we have to be able to respond gently but confidently.

“Even ancient writers hostile to Christianity like Josephus, Tacitus, and Pliny the Younger, confirm the existence of a Man from Nazareth who preached throughout Galilee and Judea, ran afoul of the authorities, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and sparked what would eventually become the world’s largest religion.

“And let’s not forget the New Testament itself, manuscript fragments of which date to the early second century. Ravi Zacharias, who’s speaking at our Wilberforce Weekend in May, points out (<http://www.rzim.eu/why-trust-the-bible>) that the evidence for the life and words of Jesus is stronger than the evidence for Plato. Classicist Michael Grant (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christ_myth_theory#cite_note-MGrant1977-93) sums it up best when he writes that ‘we can no more reject Jesus’ existence than we can reject the existence of a mass of pagan personages whose reality as historical figures is never questioned.’

“Look, though many scholars who affirm Jesus’ existence still reject the supernatural claims that make Him worthy of our worship, one thing is certain: Headlines do not equal history. And serious media should stop giving air-time and credibility to Jesus-deniers.”¹

This is not a recent development. In the summer of 1999, ABC devoted a special on the life of Christ with Peter Jennings reporting: *The Search for Jesus*. The program acknowledged that today, as in his own time, Jesus remains one of history’s most intriguing and enigmatic figures who is as elusive and mysterious as ever.² Not to be outdone, CBS gave us the miniseries *Jesus* in May 2000. This Jesus turns out to be a New Age sensitive guy who would fit nicely in most of the TV sit-coms.³ More recently (March 8, 2004), ABC gave us *Judas*, a made-for-TV movie. *Judas* begins by stating that, “the following film is an interpretative dramatization of Judas’s relationship with Jesus.” What exactly the film is interpreting is not clear, since it is most certainly not working from the Bible or accepted historic documents, except in rough outline. Most of the dialogue hovers between the painfully funny and just plain painful. Judas first meets the Messiah after witnessing Jesus clearing the Temple of merchants. Judas to Jesus, over a cup of wine: “You know, I have to tell you, I was very impressed with what you did at the Temple today.” Jesus replies, somewhat chagrined and regretful, “Well, don’t be. You know, I was trying to make a point and lost my temper. You can’t change a man’s heart by yelling at him, by humiliating him, by taking away his livelihood.” Later, Jesus asks Judas to handle His money, saying, “I’m no good with money. Whatever I have, I tend to lose.” In another scene, Herod refers to John the Baptist as “a pain in the ass.” It’s enough to make one long for Aramic (like Mel Gibson used in *The Passion of the Christ*). The one interesting aspect of this production is that it works overtime to avoid the perceived anti-Semitism of a literal reading of the Gospels, creating a bizarre conspiracy scenario in which Pontius Pilate (Tim Matheson of *Animal House* fame) orchestrates the events leading up to the crucifixion in order to pin the blame for Christ’s death on the Jews.⁴ This touches the problem we face today – everybody wants to claim Jesus. James Sire makes this point, “To Eastern-oriented religious groups, Jesus is an avatar – one of the many incarnations of God; to Christian Scientists, he is the Great Liberator; to Spiritualists, he is a first-rate medium; to one new consciousness philosopher, he is the prototype of Carlos Casteneda’s don Juan, a sorcerer who can restructure events in the world by mental exercise. Everyone, it seems, wants Jesus for themselves.”⁵ Let’s not forget the Jesus of TBN’s so-called “Faith” teachers who proclaim a rich Jesus who wore designer clothes and promised financial prosperity to all of his followers.⁶ Edmund Clowney provides us with this important warning, “There is danger that you will begin to

worship an imaginary Christ, not the Christ who says the things that are written, but a Christ of your own imagination, a harsh Christ who has not the meekness of Jesus, or a permissive Christ who is not the Holy One of God. It is so easy for us to invent another Christ and fail to be in subjection to the true Lord.⁷ The late John Gerstner persuasively argued that unless you come to a biblical understanding of Jesus (specifically that He is fully God and fully man) you are *not* a Christian – period.⁸ But who is (or was) Jesus? There is the traditional view, of course, but hardly anyone (even among professing Christians) seems interested in the Christ who has come down to us in terms of orthodox theology. Others have come up with much wilder speculations. In 1970, the philologist and expert on the Dead Sea Scrolls, John Allegro, suggested that far from being a historical figure, Jesus was no more than the code word for an ancient sex-cult inspired by a hallucinogenic mushroom. This did not enhance his academic reputation, and in the words of one critic “gave mushrooms a bad name”! Mr. Allegro died in 1988; his hypothesis did not survive him. In 1984, London Weekend Television screened a three-part program called *Jesus-The Evidence* (in which they had invested two years and over a half million dollars, and came up with a rag-bag of theories including those suggesting that Jesus was a hypnotist, an occultist, a magician and a sexual deviant. In their book, *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, M. Baigent, R. Leigh and H. Lincoln put forward the novel notions that Jesus was an intergalactic freedom fighter who came to earth and married, and that his descendants are secretly plotting to take over Europe!⁹ Most of these ideas are far-fetched and others downright ridiculous. But this highlights the natural man’s hostility to the God of the Bible.

REASONS FOR GOD’S WRATH

Because we take sin lightly, we are, therefore, offended when we hear about God’s wrath. Simply put – we don’t think God should be angry over our sin. Note this well. God *never* judges unless judgment is deserved. In Romans 1:19-23 Paul will give us *four* specific reasons for God manifesting His wrath.

A. The Revelation of Creation

The “because” of verse 19 is connected with the last clause of verse 18. This tells us the reason for Paul affirming the judgment of God on men for suppressing the truth, which God has clearly made known to them. God has, as it were, left his footprints and fingerprints all over creation. This revelatory knowledge is *not* redemptive. “It serves simply the negative purpose and function of preserving man’s responsibility before God, because it heightens the conviction of sin and brings to consciousness the state of inexcusability.”¹⁰ Creation is to serve as a glorious theater of God’s majesty and splendor. Likewise, man, created in the image of God, carries about within him an innate knowledge of the Creator. This inner witness or monitor (the conscience) serves primarily a negative purpose of alerting fallen mankind to the foreboding sense that something is wrong.

B. The Rejection of the Knowledge of God

Men have turned away from what God has made known to them in creation. They are, therefore, indicted for failing to glorify the living and true God. Man was created for this purpose and is guilty of failing to glorify God (cf. Leviticus 10:3; I Chronicles 16:24-29; Psalm 148; Isaiah 48:1-11; Romans 15:5-6; Revelation 4:11). Because of this, they are also *thankless* and their foolish hearts are plunged into darkness.

C. The Rationalization of Fallen Mankind

Truth and light go together as does sin and darkness. When men reject the truth, they demonstrate only foolishness. The word translated “fool” in verse 22 is *MORANTHENAI*. It is a very strong word, surpassing even *ASYNETOS* (translated *foolish* heart in verse 21). The noted German scholar Adolf Schlatter captured the essence of this when he wrote, “The inability to grasp and understand results in the conjuring up of flights of fancy and impossible goals that are groundless and detached from reality.”¹¹

D. The Religious Inventions of Man

Look around today at the religions that capture the allegiance of men. “Paul’s only standard for measuring religions is the longing for truth. His only question is: What do people say about God? Whatever they are seeking for themselves by means of their religious acts, namely, to secure and increase their happiness, to atone for their guilt, and to gain for themselves the assistance of the deity, all of this is put aside. The individual is godless if he fabricates religion in his own interest, for the sake of his own happiness. God must be worshipped for the sake of God. With this rule, Paul proved to be fully obedient as a disciple of Jesus.”¹²

CONCLUSION: Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) put his finger on the issue we are examining when he observed, “It is indeed common for men to conceal their faults and gratify their passions in secret and especially, when they are first initiated in vice, to make use rather of artifice and dissimulation than audaciousness and effrontery. But the arts of hypocrisy are in time exhausted and some unhappy circumstance defeats those measures which they had laid for preventing a discovery. They are at length suspected, and by that curiosity which suspicion always excites, closely pursued and openly detected. It is then too late to think of deceiving mankind by false appearances, nor does anything remain but to avow boldly what can no longer be denied. Impudence is called in to the assistance of immorality, and the censures, which cannot be escaped, must be openly defied. Wickedness is in itself timorous and naturally skulks in coverts and in darkness, but grows furious by despair and, when it can fly no farther, turns upon the pursuer. Such is the state of a man abandoned to the indulgence of vicious inclinations. He justifies one crime with another, invents wicked principles to support wicked practices, endeavors rather to corrupt others than own himself corrupted and to avoid that shame which a confession of his crimes would bring upon him, calls evil good and good evil, puts darkness for light and light for darkness. . . . Wickedness in this state seems to have extended its power from the passions to the understanding. Not only the desire of doing well is extinguished, but the discernment of good and evil is obliterated and destroyed. Such is the infatuation produced by a long course of obstinate guilt. Not only our speculations influence our practice, but our practice reciprocally influences our speculations. We not only do what we approve, but there is danger lest in time we come to approve what we do, though for no other reason but that we do it. A man is always desirous of being at peace with himself, and when he cannot reconcile his passions to his conscience, he will attempt to reconcile his conscience to his passions.”¹³

ENDNOTES

¹ John Stonestreet, *BreakPoint: Questioning Jesus’ Existence: An Eastertime Media Tradition* (<http://breakpoint.org/author/Stonestreet/>).

² Cf. the interview Peter Jennings gave to *Christianity Today* (June 12, 2000), pp. 72-73.

³ The magazine *CCM: Music, Faith & Culture* (CCM stands for Contemporary Christian Music) devoted its April 2000 issue to the miniseries and raved about it even though they acknowledged that it had repeatedly taken extra-biblical liberties (i.e., sensational special effects like Jesus flying!) (p. 30), cf. the critique by R.M. Anker “Lights, Camera, Jesus: Hollywood looks at itself in the Mirror of the Messiah” *Christianity Today* (May 22, 2000), pp. 58-63.

⁴ See “Culture Beat” by Andrew Coffin in *WORLD* (Mar. 6, 2004), p. 12.

⁵ J. W. Sire, *Scripture Twisting: 20 Ways the Cults Misread the Bible* (IVP, 1980), p. 24.

⁶ For extensive documentations on this cf. H. Hanegraaff, *Christianity In Crisis* (Harvest House, 1993).

⁷ E. P. Clowney, “The Unchanging Christ” in *Our Savior God: Studies on Man, Christ, and the Atonement* ed. J. M. Boice.

⁸ J. H. Gerstner, *Primitive Theology: The Collected Primers of John H. Gerstner* (Soli Deo Gloria, 1996), pp. 115-160.

⁹ Cf. John Blanchard *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?* (Evangelical Press, 1989), p. 14.

¹⁰ S. Lewis Johnson, *Romans* (Believers Bible Bulletin, 1980), Lesson 3, p. 4.

¹¹ A. Schlatter, *Romans: The Righteousness of God* (Hendrickson, 1995), p. 40.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ As cited in Ray Ortlund, Jr., *A Passion for God: Prayers and Meditations on the Book of Romans* (Crossway 1994), p. 40.