

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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<b>Series:</b>	<b>Scripture Memory</b>		Pastor/Teacher
<b>Number:</b>	<b>128</b>		Gary L.W. Johnson
<b>Text:</b>	<b>1 Timothy 1:15; 2 Corinthians 11:4</b>		
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### ANOTHER JESUS? (Part I)

The question Jesus posed to His disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:15), has been revamped in our day. Due to the hermeneutic of self-centeredness, our narcissistic culture has been seduced into believing the lie that God is some cosmic bellhop eager to do our bidding, so we effectively put Jesus’ question this way, “Who would you like me to be?” Because our hearts are, in Calvin’s words, “idol factories,”<sup>1</sup> we should recognize that this tendency is not restricted to theological liberals and the like. David Wells has noted that, “The shape which our Christology assumes is determined by the presupposition and operating assumptions with which we start.”<sup>2</sup> If we begin, for instance, with the assumption that Jesus’ first concern is my personal happiness (as I define happiness), then this will serve as a filter in how I read the Bible. Due to the widespread influence of the Health and Wealth preachers that crowd the airwaves of so-called “Christian television,” this is exactly how Jesus is portrayed. People treat the Bible like a road map to personal fulfillment or like a manual for fixing life’s problems. In fact, given the therapeutic mindset that has gained ascendancy in our culture, even our evangelical churches can find themselves culturally conditioned to read the Bible through a paradigm that is quite foreign to historic Christianity. This helps to explain how people today can defend decidedly unbiblical notions (i.e., homosexuality is simply an alternative lifestyle) by selectively appealing to the Bible and the re-interpreting everything through that particular grid. In order to properly answer Jesus’ question in Matthew 16:15, we must first ask the *right* question. Interpretations of Jesus are fraught with bias. He’s a powerful figure whom people want on their sides – and they’re willing to re-create him in their image to enlist his support. Animal-rights activists imagine a vegetarian Jesus. New Agers make him an example of finding the god within. And radical feminists strip him of divinity so that Christianity doesn’t appear sexist. “Frankly, it’s hard to escape the feeling that our culture has taken Jesus’ question *Who do you say that I am*, and changed it to *Who do you want me to be?*”<sup>3</sup> Here are just a few examples.

In 1980, Samuel Levine published the book *You Take Jesus, I’ll Take God: How to Refute Christian Missionaries*. He argued that Christians misunderstood the Old Testament when they apply passages such as Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53 to Jesus. Books like this continue to make sensational splashes and contribute to the never-ending debate over Jesus of Nazareth. The true identity of Jesus Christ remains one of the most controversial issues in the history of religion – beginning with the different views of Jesus in his own day. Some saw him as a healer, a teacher, a prophet, maybe even Elijah come back from the dead (Matt. 16:14). Others saw him as a demon-possessed man (Matt. 9:34; 12:24), a political troublemaker, or simply Joseph the carpenter’s kid (Mark 6:3). But Peter clarified Jesus’ identity after Jesus asked his disciples outright, “But who do you say that I am? Peter answered, under the Spirit’s inspiration, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:15-16). But this specificity is a problem today. The British philosopher and authority on Immanuel Kant, Norman Kemp Smith, spoke for many of his contemporaries when he remarked, “I have no difficulty with the idea of God, but I do with that of Christ: one time, one place. Very difficult.” His comment acknowledges that when we say the words *Jesus Christ* we are not talking about an idea, symbol, or principle, but a specific historical figure.<sup>4</sup> Overwhelmingly Americans believe that Jesus was sinless, brave, and emotionally stable. By lesser margins they regard him as easy to understand (!), physically strong and attractive, practical, warm, and accepting. Athletes come up with creative portrayals of Jesus that elude modern scholarship. Norm Evans, former Miami Dolphins lineman, wrote in his book *On God’s*

*Squad*, “I guarantee you Christ would be the toughest guy who ever played this game . . . If he were alive today I would picture a six-foot-six-inch 260 pound defensive tackle who would always make the big plays and would be hard to keep out of the backfield for offensive linemen like myself.” Fritz Peterson, former New York Yankee, more easily fancies Jesus in a baseball uniform: “I firmly believe that if Jesus Christ was sliding into second base, he would knock the second baseman into left field to break up the double play. Christ might now throw a spitball, but he would play hard within the rules.”<sup>5</sup> Not to be outdone, TV personality Kathie Lee Gifford recently came out with a book of interviews in her book *The Jesus I Know*. Predictably, this Jesus also bears little resemblance to the Jesus of the Bible. This Jesus frequently appears to people in their dreams, talks directly to individuals, and his primary purpose is to solve people’s personal problems. The cross and resurrection take a back seat to Jesus healing people’s emotional bruises. Scripture, like Philippians 4:13 (I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me) is claimed to say that we can accomplish our personal goals of any kind regardless of what that might be.<sup>6</sup>

II. **THE PURPOSE OF CHRIST’S COMING.** Augustine, the great Church father, said long ago, “There was no other reason for Christ the Lord to come, except to save sinners.”<sup>7</sup> Jesus did not come into the world to be merely a role model or a life coach. He did not come into the world merely as a great religious teacher and certainly not to give us advice on how to solve personal problems! The great hymn writer John Newton made this important observation, “Though the Apostle Paul has written largely and happily upon every branch of Christian doctrine and practice; and, with respect to his writings, as well as his preaching, could justly assert, *that he had not shunned to declare the whole counsel of God*; yet there are two points which seem to have been (if I may so speak) his favourite topics, which he most frequently repeats, most copiously insists on, and takes every occasion of introducing. The one is, to display the honours, power, and faithfulness of the Lord Jesus Christ; the other, to make known the great things God had done for his own soul. And how deeply his mind was impressed with the mercies he had received in his conversation and call, is equally conspicuous. He takes every occasion to aggrandize the goodness of God to himself; to exaggerate and deplore the guilt and misery of his former life, in which he once trusted; and to lament the small returns he was able to make for such blessings; even when he could say, without boasting, that he had *laboured more abundantly* than the most diligent and zealous of his fellow-servants.”<sup>8</sup> Note especially “came into the world” clearly implies the preexistence and the incarnation. The stress is on the primary purpose of Jesus’ mission. “The fact that this saying is soteriological in nature may suggest that the false teaching likewise pertained to salvation.”<sup>9</sup>

II. **PAUL’S TRUSTWORTHY STATEMENTS.** The first of these is found here in 1 Timothy 1:15. The other four are 1 Timothy 3:1, 4:8; 2 Timothy 2:11-13 and Titus 3:8. Hendriksen points out that there are three things that characterizes these faithful sayings: (1) Its reliability; (2) Its content; (3) Its personal appropriation.<sup>10</sup>

III. **PAUL’S PERSONAL ASSESSMENT.** The Apostle calls himself “the chief of sinners.” Note the present tense *I am*. Note also the emphasis in the Greek text on the word *worst*, which literally could be translated “worse than the worst.” What kind of sinner did Paul see himself as? He was a *blasphemer* because he denied the deity of Jesus Christ and forced others to deny it. He was a *persecutor* who used physical power to try to destroy the church. “Murderous threats” were the very breath of his life (Acts 9:1, NIV). He persecuted the Christian church (1 Cor. 15:9) and then discovered that he was actually laying hands on Jesus Christ, the Messiah! (Acts 9:4) When Paul was Saul the rabbi, he consented to the stoning of Stephen and made havoc of the church (Acts 8:1-4). Paul was *injurious*, a word that means “proud and insolent.” A modern equivalent might be “bully.” It conveys the idea of a haughty man “throwing his weight around” in violence. But the basic causes of his godless behavior were “ignorance” and “unbelief.”<sup>11</sup> George Swinnock, one of the great Puritan writers, declared, “Till men see that they are cast by the law of God, and condemned men, they will never heartily desire and value a psalm of mercy. According to a man’s sense of misery, such is his estimation of mercy . . . The more bitter and irksome sin is, the more sweet and welcome Jesus Christ will be to the soul. When the sinner seeth that he is lost in himself, then, and not till then, will he truly request to be found in Christ.”<sup>12</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** Calvin observed that, “Our mind is always prone to dwell on our own worthiness and, as soon as our unworthiness becomes apparent, our confidence fails. Thus the more a man feels the burden of his sins, he ought with greater courage to betake himself to Christ, relying on what is here taught, that He came to bring salvation not to the righteous but to sinners. We are not to think that the apostle was speaking here out of any false modesty. He wished to make a confession that was not only humble but also true and that came from the bottom of his heart. But someone may ask why he considers himself the chief (*primum*) of sinners, if he fell only out of ignorance of sound doctrine and in other ways lived a life that was blameless in the eyes of men. But in these words we are warned of how grave and serious a sin unbelief is in God’s eyes, especially when accompanied by obstinacy and raging cruelty.”<sup>13</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Bk. 1, Ch. V., sec. 19.

<sup>2</sup> D. F. Wells, *The Person of Christ* (IVP, 1984), p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> R. M. Bowman, Jr. & J. E. Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus In His Place: The Case For The Deity of Christ* (Kregel, 2007), p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Timothy George, “Big Picture Faith,” *Christianity Today* (Oct. 23, 2000), p. 91.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Philip Yancy, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Zondervan, 1995), p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> Kathie Lee Gifford, *The Jesus I Know: Honest Conversations and Diverse Opinions About Who He Is* (Thomas Nelson, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> As cited in *Ancient Christian Commentary IX*, ed. P. Gorday (IVP, 2000), p. 144.

<sup>8</sup> *The Works of John Newton II* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1985), p. 276.

<sup>9</sup> Wm. Hendriksen, *1 Timothy: New Testament Commentary* (Baker, 1979), p. 76.

<sup>10</sup> Andreas J. Kostenberger, *Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary: 1-2 Timothy* (Lexham Academic, 2020), p. 84.

<sup>11</sup> W. W. Wiersbe, *Be faithful: An Expository Study of The Pastoral Epistles* (Victor Books, 1981), p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> *The Works of George Swinmock* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1992), p. 345.

<sup>13</sup> *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries 10*, eds. D. W. Torrance & T. F. Torrance (Eerdmans, 1973), p. 198.