

## Christ in Crisis: Reclaiming Jesus

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MATTHEW 16:13-19 (NRSV) *Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"<sup>14</sup> And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."<sup>15</sup> He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"<sup>16</sup> Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."<sup>17</sup> And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon*

*son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.<sup>18</sup> And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.<sup>19</sup> I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."*

In the late 12<sup>th</sup> century, Pope Lucius III established the Inquisition as a means of suppressing heresies and enforcing orthodox beliefs and practices. It was aimed at specific parties and orders within the church, but spilled out onto the general population; and while most punishments were simple forms of penance, repeat offenders were subject to torture, imprisonment, and even execution.

The Spanish Inquisition, 400 years later, was begun, not by the church, but by King Ferdinand. His "Grand Inquisitor" was to enforce religious orthodoxy as a way of controlling, not only the rabble, but also artists and writers. The atrocities of that Inquisition are legend.

That's what happens when the church or the state wields power, one over the other. It's a primary rationale for the idea of separation of church and state.

In Dostoevsky's masterpiece, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan, the philosophic brother, wrestles with the timeless question, "If God is good, why does God allow evil and suffering?" The question is so old, and so often debated, that it has a name. It's called a "Theodicy." The classic answer is that God created humans with free will, and with freedom comes consequences.

At one point in the novel, Ivan writes a poem and reads it to his brother. In the poem, Christ is reborn in a small 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish village. As he walks the streets, the people gather about him, and he begins to heal the sick. The crowds draw the attention of the Grand Inquisitor, who has him arrested.

The Grand Inquisitor tells Christ he can't continue his work, because it's at odds with the work of the Church. He reminds Christ of his temptations in the wilderness, and says that by rejecting those three temptations, he guaranteed free will for humans. Free will, he said, is an impossible burden for mankind, because almost no one is strong enough to be faithful, and those who are not will be damned forever. He tells Christ, "Rather than give people free will, you should have taken power and given people security. So, now the Church has to correct your mistake."

After reading the poem, Ivan concludes, "Nothing has ever been more insufferable for man than freedom!"

Seventy years after Dostoevsky's novel, George Orwell published *1984*, in which he describes events not unlike the Inquisition, except, it's not the church that suppresses freedom of thought, "Big Brother" is totalitarian government.

There are those all across the ideological spectrum who believe we are living out a similar scenario in our time—some pointing out oppressive religious policies, while political conservatives call our government "socialist," while political liberals call it fascist, or worse.

There is virtually no room for doubt or denial: we live in critical times. Virtually every ideology—religious, political, cultural, scientific, educational—even common ethics and basic morality—are embroiled in belligerent and divisive rhetoric.

Dostoyevsky was writing fiction . . . but oh, how familiar that tale is in our own time and our own context. It has become so easy for the church in our generation to disregard, disarm, and domesticate Jesus to the point that he hardly resembles the Jesus of the New Testament.<sup>1</sup>

Some of what I've been saying is my paraphrase of comments in the opening of a book by Jim Wallis, founder and editor of *Sojourners Magazine*. Today I'm beginning a series of sermons entitled, "Christ in Crisis: Why we need to Reclaim Jesus." It will follow the organizational structure and is inspired by a book of the same title, written by Jim Wallis, founder and editor of *Sojourners Magazine*.

It's not an exaggeration to say that Christianity in America is in danger of being hijacked. Many Mainline Protestants are saying that danger is not from emerging secularism, but from being popularly identified with right-wing political agendas; by embracing a so-called prosperity gospel; and, far too often, by narrow opposition to scientific conclusions, by discounting the value of education, and embracing misogyny, xenophobia, homophobia, and on and on.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, many Evangelicals are saying the danger, indeed, is creeping secularism, a liberal political agenda and an open defiance of biblical teachings about sin. They point to a heretical openness to other religions, particularly Islam, and a heretical embrace of scientific statements they believe deny a literal understanding of the biblical accounts of creation, virgin birth, resurrection, the second coming of Christ, and on and on.

While genuine Christianity is not in the pocket of either the left or the right, or any other human ideology for that matter, the perceptions are very real. And perceptions often become reality, unless a counternarrative emerges. Meanwhile, a spiritually hungry, institutionally disillusioned public has abandoned a church that cannot manifest itself united in Christ Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> My paraphrase of Bishop Michael Curry, Foreword to Jim Wallis. *Christ in Crisis*. (HarperOne. Kindle Edition.) Location 41.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Location 60.

In my estimation, the greatest danger to Christianity today is a church that is a house divided, with no visible effort or willingness to reconcile the divisions. Christianity is locked into a rigid binary absolutism in which each manifestation says, "I'm right, and unity is possible only when everybody agrees with me." Our Disciples of Christ is one exception, but in our openness, many evangelicals say we don't believe in anything. I hope to demonstrate otherwise with these sermons.

There is a story about an encounter between Evangelist, E. Stanley Jones and Mahatma Gandhi. Jones asks, "Mr. Gandhi, though you quote the words of Christ often, why do you appear so adamantly to reject becoming his follower?"

Gandhi replied: "Oh, I don't reject Christ. I love Christ. It's just that so many of you Christians are so unlike Christ."

So many people today, including many who have abandoned organized Christianity, wish somebody would talk more about that 1<sup>st</sup> century, brown-skinned Jewish rabbi from Nazareth. They want to listen to him. Jim Wallis observes, "It's always amazing to me how Jesus has apparently survived all of us Christians."<sup>3</sup>

This moment, burdened with division and complexity, also is filled with possibilities for we who call ourselves Christians. This crisis can be motivation to reclaim our roots, our origins, our true identity by reclaiming Jesus and his way of love.

Paraphrasing Bishop Michael Curry in the Foreword to Wallis' book, "Now is the time to reclaim that bold and countercultural Jesus who said things such as 'blessed are the peacemakers,' 'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,' 'you cannot serve God and wealth,' and 'love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Now is the time to reclaim that Jesus who turned expectations upside down with parables about a good Samaritan, a prodigal son, and the Last Judgment.

Now is the time to reclaim that Jesus who was unafraid to sit with those who others considered unacceptable, unwilling to be co-opted by the powers that be, undeterred in reaching out to the friendless and the needy, the cast down, the put down, and the disinherited.

Now is the time to reclaim that Jesus who Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "the man for others." The Jesus who showed what love looks like, giving up his own life not for anything he could get, but for the good, the well-being, the welfare, the salvation and redemption of others.<sup>4</sup>

Between now and Thanksgiving, with a couple of welcome breaks thrown in for a change of pace, I'll be sharing my own responses to Jim Wallis' Eight Questions that open the way for us to "Reclaim Jesus." **[Prayer Slide]**

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., Page 2

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., Paraphrased from Location 71ff.