

Questions for Jesus (QFJ)

“Are You the One?”

January 13/14, 2018

Digging Deeper

Questions for Jesus: “Are You the One?”

Written by: Robert Ismon Brown (bbrown@c1naz.org)

Background Notes

Key Scripture Text(s): Luke 7:17-35 (others, throughout)

Introduction to the New Series

Memories of childhood conversations with my “elders” included the discomfiting replies to questions about God. If those inquiries requested *information*, adults seemed eager to oblige, dishing out names, dates, places, and, if I was fortunate, perhaps even a few reasons. “Who was Moses?” “Were Adam and Eve really naked?” “Where did Abraham come from?” “Could Jonah really live inside a whale?” “Where’s the Jordan River?” “Who crucified Jesus?” “Oh, and what is crucifixion?” “What’s Paul’s real name?” “Why did people wave palm branches when Jesus came to town?” “The preacher said I should be ‘saved.’ What am I saved *from*?” “When was Jesus born?” “What’s the big deal about communion?” “Why did Jesus tell us to pluck out our eyes?”

More important than the questions themselves, perhaps, was the idea that I was allowed to ask them. Some of my buddies asked different kinds of questions that challenged the things we were being taught. They included *doubts* about where they world came from, about other religions, about the end of the world, about certain practices that the church frowned on, or about the complete truth of the Bible. I learned later that these were *critical* questions that revealed skepticism about what we were all supposed to believe. They sounded like naughty questions that were certain to receive a harsh reply and an attempt to correct the doubts. I got the distinct impression that some questions might very well send a person to hell. Then, as time passed, I discovered my own doubts and suspicions about the standard answers given by the church. More than sixty years later those doubts and suspicions have moved to the framework of my approach to theology and the Bible, to the church and its authority.

Along my journey with questions, I realized that my past perceptions lacked the *chutzpah* expressed by my childhood friends. They turned out to be the honest ones after all. Today I am grateful to have lived long enough to ask the hard questions and to be fortunate enough to listen to others who ask them of me. It is the duty of the church, I believe, to create open forums where all questions are on the table — a place where people are encouraged to *stay*. This conviction grew out of a better understanding of the Bible’s approach to truth, especially in the manner Jesus modeled when responding to the questions of his interlocutors.

Influenced by the totality of my experience with questions people asked Jesus and with the questions people ask me, I began meeting periodically with groups of people for whom the questions mattered because they revealed the deep concerns they had in their pursuit of the truth. Those meetings continue, and from sharing in them I’ve tried to create the environment where questions of faith — *Faith Questions* — make possible the formation of Christian lives that are immersed in the truth, wherever it may lead. This was the practice of Jesus. By one estimate¹ Jesus *answered* 113 questions, of which 61 were actually *asked him* by others, while 52 were *asked by Jesus*. The disciples asked 25; he asked the disciples 22. He answered 6 questions from women. Hostile questions numbered 14. We could go on, but others have done that work, as indicated in the footnote below. Our point is simple: Jesus and his followers developed a habit of conversation that allowed for questions. In so doing they together adopted and enhanced an ancient practice long in use by the Jewish people. Rabbis

¹ From Taylor Holmes delightful essay found at <https://taylorholmes.com/2011/08/04/how-many-questions-did-jesus-answer/>

nurtured their students, the *talmidim*, through a disciplined process, driven by Q&A. Questions were commonly answered with questions in a sincere effort to refine the answers and chip away at an understanding of the truth.

Let me return to my *Faith Questions* class project in the next few pages before we undertake this first week's study. My syllabus includes the wide-angled view of the legitimacy of asking questions as a follower of Jesus Christ. In what follows, I lay out the main points of that approach with biblical texts to illustrate this all-important practice.

Faith Questions: A Syllabus

1. If a person has "faith", should she have questions? Is doubt a "sin"? Depending on their religious tradition, a person may have mixed feelings about the answers to those questions. Which makes asking them so interesting: we are asking questions about the appropriateness of "asking questions"!
2. As a quality of human nature, asking questions is essential. Aristotle, the Greek philosopher who lived some three hundred years before Christ remarked that "philosophy begins in wonder". Socrates, his predecessor, made a practice of posing hard questions to his audience in order to, in his words, "beat out the truth". By apprenticeship, he was a stonemason, and knew something about shaping "hard material".
3. It has been said that wisdom is not shown by the answers one gives, but by the questions one asks. A little thought about this idea can lead us to understand why it is true. Asking questions means we know there are things that we don't know. It indicates a desire to learn. Children asking questions and then having them answered by parents opens doors to new unknowns, and the cycle repeats itself.
4. When our children ask questions, they are participating in the learning process. Therefore, question-asking is an important source of motivation. When children skillfully ask significant questions, it is evident that they are interested in acquiring knowledge.
5. How much more so for the person who "seeks from the standpoint of faith". The person who asks questions stands "somewhere" not "nowhere". The questioner is in the "middle of life", situated somewhere along the timeline of history, and in a particular place. It is our "situation" which prompts our questions: Our situation as human beings, and, more importantly, our situation as "believers". Faith assumes a "point of view": we all look at things in specific ways, through a definite lens, and from our situation. That is why some of us will ask questions that may seem almost irrelevant to others, although I suspect that is part of the discovery process--a willingness to say "I never thought about that before. Glad you brought it up".
6. In one sense, our questions are driven by at least three big ones:
 - What does it mean?
 - What is it worth?
 - What should I do?
7. ***Faith gives us the handhold we blindly grasp for when suffering through a dark night of the soul.*** Healthy faith comes from good answers. Healthy faith does not dispel the questions, but it assures us that there are answers to the questions. Good answers do not erase the suffering of the world, but they comfort us by proclaiming hate and violence wrong, and lives of peace and love possible. Good answers to the faith questions do not pretend that nothing horrible happens, or discount our outrage by saying that even unqualified evil is all for the best. Good answers do not defy logic or the deep intuitions of our spirits. Healthy faith lives are horrified by acts of destruction, saddened by the deaths of thousands, and frustrated by a world perverted by hate and violence.
8. ***But not all questions grow out of desperate circumstance. Sometimes they grow out of the claims of faith itself.*** We read the Bible, for example, and are faced with a strange world of ideas, beliefs, practices, and events. In the Bible, God talks to people, angels appear, water is turned into wine, nations are sent to battle to wipe out other nations, the world is created in six days, the sun stands still, virgins have babies, good people suffer, God is jealous and seems to change his mind, and, above all, the extraordinary claim is made that God has become a human being in Jesus of Nazareth.
 - It would take a wholly disinterested (or distracted) human being not to wonder about what that means, what it's worth, and what we are suppose to do with it.

- The world of faith, found in the Bible, requires explanation for the readers of the 21st century. And there are answers to some of those questions afforded us by history, archaeology and just plain solid research.
9. A recent book by Peter L. Berger, titled *Questions of Faith* (2004), has the subtitle, "A Skeptical Affirmation of Christianity." What may seem like an oxymoron is the combination of "faith" and "skeptical" in the same title. Yet, I think this underscores the nature of our work here. The root meaning of "skeptical", "skeptical" is the Greek word *skeptomai* which means "to look about, look carefully, think about, consider, examine". The true "skeptic" is a "seeker", not necessarily a "cynic" who rules out all forms of faith-based understanding. *A "skeptical faith" simply means a carefully thought-out faith which examines what it believes in a sincere effort to understand it.*
10. Is there precedent for this kind of questioning in the Bible? In many places. Here are a few examples:
- Abraham, trying to make sense out of God's decision to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah where his nephew Lot lived (Genesis 18:16-33). In this story, Abraham poses some excellent questions to God:
 - "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" (18:23)
 - "If there are fifty righteous people in the city, will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it?" (18:24)
 - "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (18:25)
 - Moses, at the burning bush (which no doubt raised its own questions!), debating with God over what possible role he should have in leading Israel out of Egypt (Exodus 3:1-4:17)
 - "I will go over and see this strange sight--why does the bush not burn up?" (3:3)
 - "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" (3:11)
 - "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you', and they ask me 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" (3:13)
 - "What if they do not believe or listen to me and say, 'The Lord did not appear to you?'" (4:1)
 - Moses, after the people made the golden calf and God told Moses, "Leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation." (32:10)
 - "O Lord, why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt...?" (32:11)
 - "Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth?'" (32:12)
 - Then Moses speaks directly to God, "Turn from your fierce anger..." (32:12)
 - And the reaction of God: "Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened" (32:14)
 - This example shows how questions directed toward God bring real response, and that questions are not merely inquiries, but are heart-felt efforts to engage God in genuine conversation.
 - Job, in response to an avalanche of personal disaster, encounters first his friends, then the mysterious young thinker, Elihu, and finally God "out of the whirlwind" (Job 38:1). Job's story is a full blown epic account of a righteous man grappling with the seemingly meaningless experience of personal loss and suffering. It is one large "Why?" question put first to human listeners and finally to God. His large question begins with this:
 - "Why did I not perish at birth, and die as I came from the womb?" (3:11)
 - "Why is life given to a man whose way is hidden, whom God has hedged in?" (3:23)
 His friends will respond with questions like. "Can a mortal be more righteous than God? Can a man be more pure than his Maker?" (4:17). Their questions proceed from the point of view that thinks suffering is the result of sin. Therefore, Job must be hiding his sin. In effect, they claimed to know the answers to Job's questions. God eventually responds to Job and, as Job later summed it up, said, "Listen now, and I will question you, and you shall answer me..." (42:4) Job's story illustrates the complexity of "question asking"--that questions we put to life's greatest puzzles may return, not only in the form of answers, but of questions put by God to us. And it turns out, the whole point of the exercise was greater understanding, not from our point of view, put from God's.
 - The collection of poems in the Hebrew Bible known as *The Psalms*. The psalms contain many kinds of poems: worship and praise, simple prayer, celebration of events in history, special occasions, and complaints. This latter form, sometimes called the "lament", invariably contains questions, some of them quite pointed and directed at God.
 - "Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" (10:1)

"Lord, who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy hill?" (15:1)

"My God, my God, why have you forsake me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?" (22:1)

"Why have you rejected us forever, O God? Why does your anger smolder against the sheep of your pasture?" (74:1)

"Why do the nations say, 'Where is their God?'" (115:2)

Other Psalms directly confront God's handling of circumstances in the poet's life and assume the form of "formal complaints", "covenant lawsuits" brought on behalf of the righteous, in hopes that God will respond and bring justice to the situation. These are also "questions" addressed honestly to God. (An example, Psalm 4)

- The New Testament also contains questions.

Jesus immediately encounters debate as he performs miracles, interprets the Hebrew Torah in new ways, and challenges the traditions of the elders. The "letters" often contain responses from people like Paul to questions raised by young churches, questions like how can the resurrection take place (1 Corinthians 15) or what's the future of the Jewish people (Romans 9-11). Revelation, an easily confusing book, raises questions about "how long?" history's painful course will take before God finally finishes his righteous purposes and ends the reign of evil and suffering (Revelation 6:10).

Ironically, the cross of Jesus becomes the greatest question posed. How can God become human and then suffer, displaying impotence and weakness? How can the Messiah, expected to powerfully change things, suffering and die? The gospels record the story of Jesus healing a young boy. They also record the words of his father, when asked by Jesus to "believe". This is what the father said: "I believe, help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24). In many ways, this is how we approach "faith questions". We come to the work eager to believe, anxious for assurance, and wanting answers. It is in the middle of our attempts at faith that we offer a simple prayer to God: "We believe, help our unbelief!"

11. From what Scripture tells us, God is highly tolerant of our questions. They do not threaten him. They do not bring down lightning bolts. By asking them, we actually show that we believe, but that our faith is growing and "in search of understanding". While at times, the answers are incomplete or may raise more questions, they can be discovered. If God seems silent, his silence is not absolute and he has chosen to speak : "in many times and ways" through prophets and finally through his Son (Hebrews 1:1ff). In our class, we want to ask the questions, be open to possible answers, rejoice when certainty is possible and be grateful when the light we see is only partial. At least we are not totally in the dark.
12. Paul once wrote (1 Corinthians 13), "Now we see through a glass darkly." He also took hope that "now we know in part.." He then showed confidence that in some future time we would "know as we are known". In other places Paul prayed for his readers, that "the eyes of their hearts would be opened" and they would grow in their understanding of what it was they had discovered in the gospel (Ephesians 1:18ff).
13. James reminds us that "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5). He then adds, "But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt..." Here is an interesting paradox, an irony in our "asking process". On the one hand, James, the teacher, reminds us that questions are always in order with God, and that he is not offended when we ask them. So, he says, "ask away!" But the approach to questions and their answers requires a "trusting" mentality. It is possible to ask "cynically", with no confidence of finding an answer. Such a person, says James, "should not think he will receive anything from the Lord". It appears from what James tells us next, that the cynic has a double agenda: he wants to appear as the "open minded skeptic", seeking honest answers to his questions. But, beneath the surface, is another intention: he really doesn't want to find answers, wants the questions to finally win out, and in so doing discredit the whole faith enterprise. But James is convinced faith is required to give stability to our lives. It's like standing on solid ground, even before we know what makes it solid. We really should find out what makes it solid, since this will help us do rather important things, like build houses on it or pave roads over it. But we still accept the ground beneath our feet and the act of accepting it is truly an act of faith, of believing.
14. What James so clearly teaches us here is that faith must make a start somewhere. We have it before we have understanding. God's existence would be such a starting point. That doesn't mean we know everything about God, or that we completely follow his ways or can figure out what he's up to. But the

viewpoint of faith must be fixed, while we embark on the questioning process. James gives us good advice here, it seems to me, in approaching our questioning task:

- He invites us to ask
- He assures us God is not offended by our questions
- He encourages us that rich answers are forthcoming
- He reminds us that we start from faith before we can have understanding

15. In the Bible, to "ask" often means "to pray". In fact the words used for praying and asking are often the same words. Praying is often asking, and asking can be praying. May I encourage all of us to consider our questions as, at the same time, prayers to God, as James reminds us; that as we sincerely seek to understanding, we do so in the attitude of prayer. Often the great philosophers of the Middle Ages (Augustine, Anselm) would compose their treatises, not as philosophical works, but as prayers, exploring with God what some great idea meant or looking for answers to some probing question. Anselm's famous argument for the existence of God was composed in the form of a prayer. In the spirit of these great thinkers and with the good advice from Brother James, let us boldly ask our questions of Jesus, in believing confidence, that God will receive them and help us find answers.

Introduction to this Week's Topic

The large question which shapes the story of the Gospels in our New Testament is about *the identity of Jesus*. For the nation of Israel such a question was not mere speculation or academic inquiry. Everything depended on the true identity of Jesus of Nazareth. Lying in the background was a history marked by deep loss. For more than half a century the empires around the land of Israel conquered territory and exiled God's people. Ancient promises about a bright future for the descendents of father Abraham had fallen into the abyss without fulfillment. When the little kingdom of Judah returned at last from Babylon, they pinned their hopes on the remaining remnant of David's royal family, imagining that *One* of his descendents would restore the throne and fulfill the promises. Sadly, the expected "son of David" did not arise with "healing in his wings" (Malachi 4:2). Instead a series of interim rulers without David's credentials seized the leadership. Most of them were puppet rulers, appointed by the Greeks or the Romans who successively ruled the world where Israel lived. Civil conflict interrupted the return to a pure Jewish state that was wholly dedicated to the Torah and practices of the faith.

Yet, there persisted *a continuing yearning for a human deliverer*, "the Son of Man," (see Daniel 7:13) who would mediate the arrival once more of the "kingdom of God" where God was king once more. The identity of such a person congealed in the title "Messiah," the "anointed One" who would resurrect the fallen house of David and be the light to draw all nations to worship the true God. He would be "the one who is to come," the divine king of the last days. Many would-be Messiahs appeared with the promise of military and political victory over the oppressive empires. Such persons gathered around them followers to advance the designs of their cause. However, each in turn, failed at the hands of the empires. Their names belong to history: Judah the Galilean (cited in Acts 5:37) is one prominent example who lived some ten years before the birth of Jesus. There was Simeon of Peraea, a former slave of Herod the Great (4 BCE – 15 CE), cited by the Jewish writer Josephus, who engaged in revolutionary activity but met his death at the hands of the Romans. In other cases, Jewish resistance movements foretold messiahs, both among the Essenes at Qumran and among the Zealots who stirred up resistance against Rome.

By the time Jesus of Nazareth appeared with John the Baptizer at the Jordan River in 30 CE, the Jewish community in Galilee and Judea had known the attempts of several persons to be the Messiah, "the One." Even the kindred people known as the Samaritans had their experience with Messianic fever, calling their version of this figure, the *Taheb*. It is evident from the testimony of the Samaritan woman from Sychar (see John 4) that her people were expecting a Messiah from among their own. Ironically, the sudden launch of John's ministry triggered rumors that he was *the One*, the Messiah, a claim he firmly denied (John 1:20-21). Evidence for this fluid messianic situation comes from the question Jesus put to his disciples, recorded in Matthew's gospel:

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

The question of messianic identity became the urgency of the times if Israel were to find their way out of the dead-end they experienced to their national future and hope.

In the key texts we examine this week, the echoes of the failed past and the expectations for a fulfilled future dominate the landscape of Jesus' public ministry. Together, they scream with the big question put to Jesus: "*Are you the One?*" which is the title of our study.

Scripture Readings:

(See each section below, with the relevant texts printed out)

Are You the One? (Luke 7:17-35; Matthew 11:1-19)

¹⁷ This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country. ¹⁸ The disciples of John reported all these things to him. So John summoned two of his disciples ¹⁹ and sent them to the Lord to ask, "*Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*" ²⁰ When the men had come to him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'" ²¹ Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind.

²² And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. ²³ And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

²⁴ When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? ²⁵ What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who put on fine clothing and live in luxury are in royal palaces. ²⁶ What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ²⁷ This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' ²⁸ I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." ²⁹ (And all the people who heard this, including the tax collectors, acknowledged the justice of God, because they had been baptized with John's baptism. ³⁰ But by refusing to be baptized by him, the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves.) ³¹ "To what then will I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? ³² They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep.' ³³ For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon'; ³⁴ the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' ³⁵ Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children" (Luke 7:17-35).

The setting for our main text is the extensive ministry of Jesus' public miracles against the ironic background of John the Baptizer's recent imprisonment. In his prophetic utterances, John had challenged the legitimacy of Galilee's ruler Herod Antipas:

Herod had arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, ⁴ because John had been telling him, "It is not lawful for you to have her" (Matthew 14:3-4).

The account reads like a bad soap opera, framing Herod's actions in proof that he was not an observant Jew. Consequently, John is put out of circulation and no longer able to continue his role as the forerunner of the Messiah. Perplexed by these developments, John sends word to Jesus with the leading question of our study this week: "*Are you the One, or are we to wait for another?*" Given the fluid messianic situation, John teeters on the edge of doubt about what he presumed to be Jesus' messianic identity, having before baptized Jesus with the attendant signs of God's confirming voice and the dove descending on him (John 1:29-34). No doubt depressed over his own imprisonment, John sends his question to Jesus. Circumstances may well prompt deep doubt even for a prophet, not unlike a more ancient figure named Elijah, John's archetype, who fled to a remote cave after Queen Jezebel, whose prophets Elijah had killed amidst the great contest of fire on Mount Carmel (see 1 Kings 18), put out a contract for his death. We read of Elijah's own depression and God's reply in 1 Kings 19.

In our main text, Luke reminds the reader of Jesus' many miraculous deeds (Luke 7:21), setting the stage for Jesus' answer to John. To the imprisoned prophet, being left out of the drama about to unfold seemed counter-intuitive and patently unfair. Why would he, the chosen forerunner of Messiah, be deprived of full participation in the fulfillment of the great prophecies to which he had so faithfully borne witness? How could the Lord allow such evil to befall him at just the moment when the glory of the coming kingdom he preached was about to dawn? These are, however, the very raw materials from which the questions of the faithful are formed. Such is the test of faith, the trials through which the people of God pass in order to purify their hearts to receive even greater truth with which to form better lives. John's question "Are you the One?" plunges him into spiritual dialog with the mysteries of God. Remember the content of John's preaching: "His [Messiah's] winnowing fork is in his hand; he will gather his wheat into the granary and then burn the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Luke 3:17). The message he delivered to Israel is now the message by which John himself must live or die. He, also, is being winnowed by the fiery circumstance of imprisonment so that soon he might be gathered into God's eternal home. Is John ready for that outcome under these trials? His question becomes the catalyst.

Questions of this magnitude can really never be only academic or the passive reflections of a disinterested observer who has no skin in the game. What John preached to others, he must now receive for himself. By asking his question "Are you the one?" John immerses his life in waters deeper than Jordan, with faith deeper than the prophet's own insights.

The reply of Jesus is full of grace and truth. He enlists the spiritual journey of the two messengers: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard" (7:22a). The messengers have been disciples of John, many of whom would eventually follow Jesus. They have been formed by the camel-haired prophet who until his imprisonment has been calling Israel to repentance through immersion in the waters of Jordan. Their experience with John has been enhanced by the more recent work of Jesus which now exceeds the scope of John's ministry. John himself spoke of this transition before he was seized by Herod:

²⁵ Now a discussion about purification arose between John's disciples and a Jew. ²⁶ They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him." ²⁷ John answered, "No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.' ²⁹ He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. ³⁰ He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:25-30).

The hour of John's *decrease* having arrived, his disciples must come to grips with the meaning of all this for their own futures. Jesus, in his answer to John, enlists them as the new witnesses to Jesus' present ministry:

"... The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. ²³ And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me" (7:22b-23)

John's disciples, the two messengers he sent to Jesus, already have before them the living truth about Jesus — the truth that identifies him as "the One." Jesus' choice of words is borrowed from the old scriptures of Israel spoken through Third Isaiah:

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; ² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn ... (Isaiah 61:1-2).

When Jesus began his ministry in Nazareth one defining Sabbath in the synagogue, he read from that text assigned to him in the Jewish lectionary:

¹⁶ When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." ²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:16-21).

Luke no doubt expected his readers to connect that prior event with the answer Jesus gives to John in prison. Jesus also expected his wider audience to make that same connection. The proof that he "is the One" consisted

in remembering the words of *Isaiah*, the use of those words by Jesus in Nazareth, and finally the actual fulfillment of those words in the miraculous deeds in which Jesus is presently engaged.

Armed with the truth of the Bible and the living testimony of witnesses, the answer Jesus gives to John becomes a decisive moment in his continuing relationship with John. Jesus does not criticize the imprisoned John for his question, but offers clarity instead. His appeal remains pointed, however, for he adds the critical blessing: “Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me” (7:23). We have reason to believe that this “anyone” refers first to John, and then to others who remain perplexed at John’s removal from the scene. The Greek word for “offense” is the root *skandalon*, translated “stumbling-block.” Since John has come so far, under so much adversity for the sake of the kingdom of God, Jesus encourages him not to “trip over” the very person whose coming he had foretold and the ancient prophets had promised. Questions asked of Jesus are either stepping stones or stumbling blocks; they are either paths to next steps or detours into the abyss. John must not lose his way or become disillusioned by short-term outcomes. He must not fear death more than he fears God. John requires the word of encouragement from Jesus who promises to bring sight and life in the good news he preaches and performs. And that word is now forthcoming.

The transition is signaled in 7:24 after the messenger leave. What Jesus says next is for “the crowds.” They are the cohort who witnessed John previously and now Jesus presently. He offers a moving tribute to the achievement of John’s ministry. In it, Jesus highlights the wilderness setting where John preached and baptized. He does this to remind the crowds that John was a rugged man, disciplined by the austerity of desert life where resources are scarce, and where John is formed by dependency on the Lord alone. John was no “reed” easily bent by the wind of popular opinion or by the attire of Herod’s lavish palaces. Evidence suggests that his appearance and diet fit well the profile of Israel’s older prophets like Elijah, traveling figures that spoke the word with boldness and paid no attention to threats from those in power. He was, by all accounts, “a mighty man of God.” John was, in Jesus’ words, “a prophet” *par excellence*. He was not an ordinary prophet, one among many others, but the prophet of biblical promise, foretold by ancient Malachi, the last of the writing prophets:

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight— indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. ² But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; ³ he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness (Malachi 3:1-3).

By Jesus’ admonition, the crowds must not discount John because of his imprisonment, anymore than John should discount Jesus. John’s work is rigorous, methodical, and planned by the Lord. As Malachi phrases his work, he is the “messenger of the covenant,” “preparer of the Lord’s coming,” “refiner of Levi’s descendents,” and facilitator of God’s coming “righteousness.” In each of these descriptions the audience is asked to see John’s work of baptism and his call of them to repentance. They are also to see that Jesus is the end, the goal, and the reason for John’s ministry. Because of John, there is now a witness to Israel that Jesus “is the One.”

In Luke 7:28, Jesus venerates John while reminding the crowds that it is the coming “kingdom” toward which John has pointed as the final good and the end of what John had been being. For the sake of the kingdom, John came, and in the fulfillment of the kingdom Jesus comes. Therefore, Jesus adds, “the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” Entering this kingdom, living the life of this kingdom — these are the supreme goods that people must now embrace. Those in religious power had resisted John, and thereby refused Jesus and the kingdom he was bringing to Israel (7:29-30). They were, says Luke’s sidebar, “rejecting God’s purposes for themselves.” Jesus here identifies the mounting opposition he would soon face, much like what experienced in Nazareth after he preached his inaugural sermon (see Luke 4:28-29). He then proceeds to offer a simile of “the people of his generation,” a biting critique of a culture that resisted the purposes of God and chose their own purposes instead.

The subsequent simile compares the climate of his times to the practices of children at play in the marketplace. Children love games, often the kind they make up with their own rules. For children, such play is normal. "Do this, say that, or pretend the other." When the leaders of Israel and the elders of the people imitate children on these terms, however, the fabric of a generation rips apart, dropping into delusional thinking, selfish ambition, and idolatrous practices. They desire kingdoms that are on their own terms and under their own control. Jesus and John belonged to the next great move of God, and the leaders whined about the new agenda. John practiced austerity and self-control within a society that desired otherwise. Jesus rubbed shoulders with all kinds of people within a culture that was patently discriminatory. Accusations against John and Jesus arose from purposes, from goods, and from ends that stood contrary to the agenda proclaimed in their joint ministries. It was nigh unto impossible for the leadership to acknowledge that Jesus "is the One" because they had decided in advance what the Messiah should look like. The dominant culture defined Messiah in either military terms, rejecting the Roman occupation and calling for revolt, or it pleaded for accommodation and appeasement, preferring no Messiah at all, only business as usual.

By contrast, the witness of John and the work of Jesus operated under the "purposes of God," pursuing a kingdom project that discounted the politics of either violence or appeasement. If Jesus is "the One," then the works and words of Jesus form the constitution for the kingdom of God. Jesus "the One" does not come with endorsements of existing political parties, whether Pharisee, Sadducee, Zealot, Essene, or Herodian. Jesus does not contribute to the reformation of existing politics; *Jesus himself is a new politics*. Jesus is the politics of the kingdom where active participants are, in his words, "greater than John," while honoring the preparations of John. Those who receive Jesus as "the One" embrace a politics of divine transformation that begins in the heart of Israel and then grows into a new social order called the church. To say that Jesus is "the One" is to proclaim, "Jesus is Lord," the honored creed of the kingdom that dawns in the world. "Jesus is Lord" reveals that he is "the One" through lives that refuse the taunts of the marketplace and choose to follow the teachings of Jesus.

In his Gospel, John the evangelist bears witness to this new political arrangement when he writes:

⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") ¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known (John 1:9-18).

In the words "he gave power to become children of God," John proclaims a new politics "not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God" (1:13). The Greek word for "power" really means "authority," a political term. Because Jesus is "the One," the future opens up to the power of "the Word made flesh, living among us" with "the glory of the father's *only son*" resting on the newly established rule of "grace and truth." If Jesus "is the One," then those who receive him into their hearts live by the authorization of "the One and only Son." Jesus, the Son, takes the Father by the hand and makes us His dearly beloved children. The politics of Jesus and his kingdom is the formation of the family of God where God is our Father and Jesus is our Lord. Only Jesus makes God truly visible in human life for he is the One and Only human face of God.

The question posed by the imprisoned John the Baptizer proves to be the defining question of the kingdom. To ask "Are you the One?" is ultimately the question about God and who He is. Otherwise, "No one has seen God." The word "God," in the dictionary of popular belief, is an ambiguous term that is susceptible to a whole host of conflicting identities. But now, in light of Jesus' coming, the question, "Who is God?" turns out to have as its answer, "God is whoever is *the One*." In its longer form, we might aptly say, "God is whoever raised Jesus from the dead, having before raised Israel from Egypt." "The One" is, then, no abstraction, but the concrete expression of God's participation in human life through *the One* we call Jesus of Nazareth. God, understood in this way, is the One and Only God, the One without equal or peer or substitute. He is the One

who invites us to receive Him as Jesus the Word become flesh. He is the One who confers the authority of the kingdom, even on those who are least.

When the Answer is Resisted, Then What?

From our reading in John 1 we have the poignant report about Jesus:

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him (John 1:10-11)

Similar reactions are noted throughout the Gospels. From an insightful parable of Jesus we see the hostile actions of those who presently hold the power in Israel:

"But the citizens of his country hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, 'We do not want this man to rule over us'" (Luke 19:14).

The resistance reached the palace of King Herod Antipas who had imprisoned and then executed John the Baptizer, only to discover that Jesus was engaged in widespread preaching and healing that exceeded the actions of John. Herod did not know what to make of Jesus, nor did his retainers who could only propose the notion that John had been raised from the dead or that Elijah or one of the prophets had somehow returned.

Mark 6:14-16 ¹⁴ King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him." ¹⁵ But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." ¹⁶ But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

Faced with Jesus' undeniable power to raise Lazarus from the dead, the ruling authorities continued to reject that Jesus is "the One" and premeditate ways to eliminate him. The following backroom exchange by Israel's authorities reveals their plans:

⁴⁵ Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. ⁴⁶ But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done. ⁴⁷ So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, "What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. ⁴⁸ If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." ⁴⁹ But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all! ⁵⁰ You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." ⁵¹ He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, ⁵² and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. ⁵³ So from that day on they planned to put him to death (John 11:45-53).

The complex politics of Roman and Jewish relations ignored the signs of Jesus' true identity and elevated the material reality of self-interest over the divine reality of God's purposes. "If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him." That statement would be good news for the kingdom of God, but in the hearts of his detractors, it is taken for disaster. "One man dies for the people." Isn't that good news for sinners? Yet to those refusing to surrender power, it is nothing but a means to an end. At the center of this provocative conversation is the telling sentence, "They planned to put him to death." Human plans replace God's plans for those who reject that Jesus is "the One."

On the eve of his death, the accusers of Jesus remained adamant in their denial that he was "the One." Lacking credible support within the legal process, their strident rejection led to extreme measures:

⁵⁹ Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for false testimony against Jesus so that they might put him to death, ⁶⁰ but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward ⁶¹ and said, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days'" (Matthew 26:59-61).

The role of witnesses saturates the New Testament account of Jesus. As we have already noted, the favorable view that he is "the One" depends on the combined testimony of Scripture and eye-witnesses. Going forward the consistent evidence about Jesus, especially concerning his resurrection, flourished through the living encounters of those who saw him alive. Opposing such visible confirmations are the false witnesses produced by his enemies. In the example above, the failure to give consistent reports led to the further distortion of Jesus' own words about the destruction of the Temple, which he meant as a reference to his death and resurrection and not to the building in Jerusalem (John 2:19). Any agreement leading to his conviction depended on fabrications and falsehoods. Later, when the disciples would answer contradictions to their testimony that Jesus is "the

One,” they maintained a reliable defense by the consistent recounting of what “they have seen and heard,” especially during court proceedings against them:

¹⁹ But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; ²⁰ for we cannot keep from speaking about *what we have seen and heard*" (Acts 4:19-20).

We declare to you what was from the beginning, *what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands*, concerning the word of life-- ² this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us-- ³ we declare to you *what we have seen and heard* so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ (1 John 1:1-3).

Palpable testimony sustained the life of the church, preserved in the written records of the apostles and those who knew the apostles. With one voice they persisted through evangelical resilience to confess that Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, and the Messiah of Israel is “the One” foretold by the prophets and revealed as God in human form. They grasped the Word from heaven and the Lord on earth with the hands of faithful trust and trusting faith, even when the opposition threatened them with death.

In an elegant text, the writer to the *Hebrews* summarized the shared belief of the early church that the main focus of Christian faith is living witness to the person of this Jesus:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by *so great a cloud of witnesses*, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ² *looking to Jesus* the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart (Hebrews 12:1-3).

“Looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” testifies to the uniqueness of Jesus and to the concrete difference he makes in the formation of a people called Christians. Such a witness, of belief and of life, confirms the earliest assurance that Jesus is “the One.” He is “the One” and no other.

Apostolic preaching never waived, in spite of resistance, and eventually reached into the heart of the Roman and Greek worlds with the same message about the same Jesus. On one epic occasion, Peter stands in the midst of non-Jews, gathered in the house of Cornelius a Roman military officer, and proclaims with the same clarity that Jesus “is the One”:

God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹ We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; ⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, ⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and *to testify that he is the one ordained by God* as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (Acts 10:38-43).

The occasion was *epic* because the primary focus of evangelism in the early days following the ascension of Jesus had been on recovering the “lost sheep of the house of Israel,” as Jesus had previously instructed the apostles, and not to non-Jews:

⁵ These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, ⁶ but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. ⁷ As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' ⁸ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons (Matthew 10:5-8).

Peter’s visit to Cornelius marked the divine plan and the pivot to bring the same gospel to the Gentiles, and, as this text reveals, he does so with the same resolve that Jesus “*is the One* ordained by God.” The new audience does not in any way change the content of the gospel Peter preaches, or the conviction that Jesus is the unique Son of God who even now brings God’s saving power to the nations of the world where the mighty power of Rome rules the souls and bodies of human beings. If Jesus *is the One*, then mighty Caesar *is not*.

St. Paul, himself an unexpected convert to the Christian church, knew the resistance of the Empire to the spread of the Gospel. He spoke of “principalities and powers” that opposed the kingdom of God (Ephesians 6:11ff). He tasted the coercion of Roman might during his imprisonment in Philippi and then in Rome. He would later

write sweeping poetry about the supremacy of Jesus, without equal, before whom the whole world would one day bow:

⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name that is above every name,
¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,
in heaven
and on earth
and under the earth,
¹¹ and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:9-11).

If Jesus is Lord, then Caesar is not.

Conclusion

What we read as the exclusivity of Jesus in the creeds of the Christian faith is no mistake. From the testimony of eyewitnesses to the transformation of human lives, the foundation of the church has rested on the singular confession that Jesus is “the One and Only”; that he is *Lord*. Nor is this just hyperbole or merely the expression of private religious commitment, such that a person might say things like, “I really believe that Jesus is Lord, but that’s just my personal opinion.” It is unclear what kind of authentic faith could say such a thing, but our faith cannot. And so, a few clear statements anchor the vessel of orthodox *belief* and our *behavior*:

⁴ And you know the way to the place where I am going." ⁵ Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" ⁶ Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. *No one comes to the Father except through me.* ⁷ If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him" (John 14:4-7).

For us to ask, “Are you the One?” is to open ourselves to Jesus’ answer, “No one comes to the Father except through me.” He is the One because he is the way we must walk. To know Jesus is to know God the Father, and, more importantly, to see Him so that we might walk in His ways. He is the *only way to God* while permitting the varieties of human experience which discover *many ways to Jesus*.

Then also from the lips of Peter, a man whose confession sifted through the many possible identities of Jesus and settled on only One, comes this direct affirmation of Jesus:

¹¹ This Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.' ¹² *There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved* (Acts 4:12).

“No one” and “no other name” are evangelical forms for saying that Jesus “is the One.”

Furthermore, in his grand hymn of worship to the exalted Jesus (Colossians 1:15-20)², St. Paul edits his masterful poetry received from both Jewish and Christian traditions into an artistic praise of Jesus as Creator (1:15-16), Preserver (1:17-18a), and Redeemer. Through this three-dimensional lens, Jesus shines forth without qualification as “the One”:

*He is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of all creation.
For in him all things were created
in heaven and on earth,
things visible and invisible,
whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers.
All things have been created through him and for him.*

*He himself is before all things,
and in him all things hold together.
He is the head of the body,
the church.*

² An excellent analysis of this poem comes from Eduard. Schweizer, “Christ in the Letter to the Colossians.” *Review and Expositor* 70:4 (Fall1973): 451-67.

*He is the beginning,
the firstborn from the dead.*

So that he might come to have first place in everything,
in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.
Through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things,
by making peace through the blood of his cross,
whether on earth
or in heaven.

Theologians often speak of *the preeminence of Jesus* in order to establish his central place in the purposes of God. In so doing they declare him “to be the One.” Thus, Paul uses the language, “So that he might come to have the first place in everything.” However, this is not only a theological pivot but the moral standard which guides the kind of lives we are to live. *He is the One with the first place* when we acknowledge that Jesus is the Lord of everything that matters to us. To him we surrender ourselves so that he might form us anew in the image that he himself bears. No other ruler or power deserves our supreme allegiance. We cannot serve two masters (Matthew 6:24).

The preeminence of Jesus is not limited to our private experience of God, however, for Paul reminds us in his poem that Jesus “the One and Only” also forms a community of persons called the church where he is the “head of the body.” He therefore *begins* a whole new society where all are citizens of God’s kingdom. When the watching world observes this community, it ought to witness a different kind of people and then ask the further question, “What makes such a community possible?” Our answer, like that offered by Jesus, is an affirmative one: “We are this kind of people because Jesus of Nazareth, God’s Son, has the first place in everything we plan, say, and do. We are this kind of church because, in simple terms, “He is the One.”

Finally, in the last book of the Bible, the central place of Jesus radiates in the glorious vision witnessed by John the revelator. There, using the symbols of the church as a cluster of seven lampstands, Jesus walks in majesty, tending the lamps, showing his presence, and purifying his people:

¹² Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. ¹⁴ His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵ his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. ¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force. ¹⁷ When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, ¹⁸ and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades (Revelation 1:12-18).

Appearing to John in this way, Jesus ever remains “*in the midst,*” “the living one,” “dead ... alive forever and ever,” and the keeper of the keys to death. He “is the One” who reminds his followers, “Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last.” Everything begins with Jesus in life and everything will reach its end with Jesus at death. And so to the question asked of Jesus, we have his hopeful answer: “I am the One who is there in the beginning, and I am the One who will be there in the end.”

To God Be the Glory! Amen!