

Why Unitarians need to save Jesus

Clay Nelson © 11 September 2016

As someone who has self-identified as a “progressive Christian,” for more than a decade, I have often been asked why I needed that modifier. My answer is that I can’t say, “I’m a Christian” without choking. I explain that I used to think of myself as a liberal Christian, but while liberal Christians are usually on the right side of history regarding social justice and human rights issues, they still adhere to the traditional liturgies, creeds and doctrines of the church, which too often have perpetuated the abuse they oppose. A time came when my consciousness was raised. I could no longer adhere to them with integrity. A progressive Christian is willing to let go of those traditions and formularies to seek new ways of being the church. But after nearly ten years of exploring that avenue while at St Matthew-in-the-City and nearly thirty years of following scholarship on the historical Jesus, I’ve come to accept that the institution as it is cannot permit such deviation from the company line and still maintain control. It would prefer to die than change.

When I first came to New Zealand I discovered Lloyd Geering’s work. The first thing I read was his *Christianity without God*. It was a relief to have someone make legitimate my non-theist perspective and give me a language to articulate it. While writing this paragraph on Friday I got an email informing me that the United Church of Canada (which is supposed to be at least liberal) had just declared the brilliant and creative Gretta Vosper unsuitable for ministry because of her atheistic views. In church-speak this means she has been defrocked. This is an excerpt from their report:

Ms. Vosper told the Committee that she does not believe in a Trinitarian God. Instead, by ‘god/God’ she means what is created between people in relationships, but does not exist separate from us, and the construct is not divine. Ms. Vosper does not use the word ‘God’ because its use is a barrier to some people. She does not believe that Jesus was divine. He is not the Son of God. Jesus is not her Saviour. Ms. Vosper no longer calls herself a Christian. She does not believe that there is a Holy Spirit. Ms. Vosper does not believe that there is a God who calls anyone to ministry. Ms. Vosper does not administer sacraments. She does not consider scripture to be the primary source, but merely one source of information amongst many. She is no longer in essential agreement with the statement of doctrine of The United Church of Canada. Instead, Ms. Vosper said that her theology has evolved beyond the doctrine of the United Church.

The majority of the Conference Interview Committee has determined that Ms. Vosper is not suitable to continue as a minister in the United Church. The reasons of the majority and the dissent are set out in this Report.

They have made right belief more important than the highly ethical work she has done in and with her congregation. By these criteria, I am equally unsuitable for ministry and there are plenty of my former colleagues who would say AMEN to that. Disgusted, I am now looking for a book with the title *Jesus without Christianity* as a companion book to Gretta’s *With or Without God*.

I am far from being the first person that has reached this conclusion after having committed their life to the church.

In 1922, the famous preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick had this to say, “Stagnation in thought or enterprise means death for Christianity as certainly as it does for any other

vital movement. Stagnation, not change, is Christianity's most deadly enemy, for this is a progressive world."

Last week, in my discussion of values, I explained that focusing on one set of values blocks an opposing set of values. The church has too often chosen to make its primary value conserving tradition, which blocks its opposing values of self-direction, which encompass independent thought and action—choosing, creating and exploring. It is one thing to value tradition and quite another to use it to block life-giving self-direction.

But if tradition and the stagnation it fosters is the enemy of the church, the enemy of Jesus is the church itself—though it claims to be his body. It is a form of autoimmune disease like Lupus or AIDs, where the body attacks itself. Howard Thurman, a great African-American philosopher, civil rights advocate and mystic is right, "For nearly 2000 years, in large ways and small, the Church, and what passes for Christianity, has betrayed Jesus."

Here is one example he gives of the betrayal: *The basic fact is that Christianity as it was born in the mind of this Jewish thinker and teacher appears as a technique of survival for the oppressed, [but] it became, through the intervening years, a religion of the powerful and the dominant, used sometimes as an instrument of oppression.*

He explains how the church did it by playing on those values grouped under the heading "Security". Where we value safety of self. Thurman points out, "If a man is convinced that he is safe only as long as he uses his power to give others a sense of insecurity, then the measure of their security is in his hands. If security or insecurity is at the mercy of a single individual or group, then control of behavior becomes routine. All imperialism functions in this way."

Those who hold security values also hold complementary values about the importance of power in the sense of dominance and control of others. Together these values oppose value groups Jesus manifested: self-determination, universalism and benevolence. Jesus had no intention of creating a new religion or church, but if he had, it would not have been an imperialist one.

We have just completed a 12-session series on *Saving Jesus from the Church*. My purpose was to show how Jesus has been misrepresented, misunderstood and manipulated to further the power of the imperial church. So this sermon is for those who were unable to attend.

The series focused on the historical person, the pre-Pauline, pre-Gospel, pre-Easter, pre-Church Jesus. The one that lived and breathed, taught and healed, laughed and prayed. He would not recognize the spiritual Christ his followers created out of his humanity after his death.

Robin Meyers, who wrote a book with the same title as this series, looks at how it all went wrong. He challenges us to look at the Sermon on the Mount: "In the whole thing, there is not a single word about what to believe, only instructions on what to do or how to be. Fast forward 300 years to the Nicene Creed and the essence of what is supposed to define a Christian, and there's not a word about what to do or how to be—only about what to believe. Clearly, something's gone wrong," he concludes.

The author of the series goes on to ask, "Not plain enough? The Apostle's Creed and

the Nicene Creed themselves add insult to injury. Both creeds are products of a church trying to ‘circle the wagons’ and establish an institutional identity. Both creeds more or less say Jesus was ‘Born of the Virgin Mary (comma) suffered under Pontius Pilate.’ And there you have it: the entire life of Jesus, all of his teachings, the parables, his interaction with the poor, his healings—whether metaphorical or literal—all reduced to a comma.”

The final episode in the series began with a conversation with Brandon Scott. He is a New Testament scholar who has focused on Paul and the historical Jesus. Not ordained, he is not beholden to the church for his livelihood. I was fortunate to hear him give several talks here in Auckland two years ago.

In his interview Scott says, “I think the historical Jesus counts now like he’s never counted before. What I’m not convinced ought to survive is Christianity. In fact, I’ve become more and more convinced that Christianity is the enemy of Jesus. When people ask me if I’m a Christian, I almost always say I’m a follower of Jesus—and I’m not sure that’s compatible with being a Christian.” I’m going to use that line from now on.

Since the merger in 1961 of Unitarians and Universalists in America the central focus of Unitarians is no longer on Jesus. But before that we were considered the black sheep of Christianity. Why? Because we did not accept the divinity that some early Christians had projected back onto the very human Jesus. Our early forebears were the targets of those who wrote the creeds. The Nicene Creed was a political line in the sand to exclude those of our persuasion. A divine Christ was more useful to those seeking power and control than a human Jesus. They needed to banish, if not stamp us out as a threat to their dominance. Our crime was we were more interested in the comma between Jesus’ birth and suffering than in the miraculous aspects of the Gospels including the resurrection. We were progressive Christians before it was fashionable.

However, since 1961 Jesus’ importance has diminished for Unitarians. I believe it is because we have confused Jesus with Christianity. Thus, for many who have been the victims of toxic Christianity, both have been rejected. It is understandable. None of us here wants to be associated with the misogynist, homophobic, anti-science, prejudiced, oppressive aspects of the church. Marcus Borg has pointed out that people who believe the creeds and adore the post-Easter Christ can still be jerks. But I would argue that the comma is the antidote. We need to reclaim the historical Jesus as one of our own. The world needs him. And to be fair there are a growing number of Christians who feel the same, I just don’t hold much hope for their success in redeeming the institution. Although I would welcome their success.

So, those of you who were not part of this adult religious education experience might ask, “What is in ‘the comma’ worth saving?” Here are the Cole’s Notes of 18 hours of presentation and discussion on *Saving Jesus*:

- Unitarians reject a literal interpretation of the Virgin Birth, but we shouldn’t necessarily reject the meaning behind the story of the incarnation – God made flesh in Jesus. His life and message were not about his being the one and only person in history who embodied the divine, but that the sacred is everywhere. We each embody it and are one with it. This understanding undergirds our first Unitarian principle to respect the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

- Jesus was never a Christian, but a good Jew. He was also a prophet, a healer, a wisdom teacher, a companion, a mystic, but no more or less the son of God than any of us. He never claimed to be anything more than what he was, human. The South African scholar, Albert Nolan, puts it this way: ‘Jesus is a much-underrated man. To deprive this man of his humanity is to deprive him of his greatness.’ Unitarians who are secular humanists could applaud this.
- Jesus was an eastern not western teacher. He sought to raise consciousness, not teach right belief or a moral code. He used the tools of the wisdom teacher to do it: humour, stories, irony, metaphors and short sayings. His purpose was to make his audience think for themselves. The wisdom tradition is often associated with the mystical or spiritual aspects of various faith traditions. It helps people work through the “whys” of life without resorting to shallow, pat answers. Jesus encouraged our fourth principle before we had it: a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.
- Jesus proclaimed one message and it was NOT, “I have come to die for your sins.” He came to proclaim the good news that the Kingdom of God was here now. It was not a saccharine message about going to heaven sometime in the future. It was a political statement that was intended to confront the oppressive kingdom of Rome. He sought to give us a picture of a world where God reigns now and he put us in the picture. He wanted us to know it resides in us. We make it a tangible by bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives, recovering of sight to the blind, letting the oppressed go free, and proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favour. Unitarians summarise this less poetically in our second and sixth principles: We seek justice, equity and compassion in human relations with the goal being a world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

There are a lot more important bullet points that could be given but I probably should add one more:

- Jesus never heard of his resurrection. He did not preach or promise it. But he might have understood why such stories would be told. Like we who sometimes feel the presence of a deceased loved one, those closest to him felt the same. The resurrection stories were their way of trying to explain his inexplicable presence. But even more they were an attempt to explain how he had transformed them by his life of compassion, courage and integrity. He had taught them how to stand up to a world not fitting of the divine within, between, and beyond them. In Greek the word for resurrection means literally to stand up. The historical Jesus would be pleased when any of us are resurrected, standing up to all that entombs us; all that oppresses us.

Unitarians have long been a resurrected people. We have stood up for freedom of thought and toleration, we have stood up to superstition and mindless prejudice, we have stood up against slavery and for civil rights, we have stood up for women’s rights, we have stood up for the full inclusion of the LGBTQ community, we are standing up for refugees, we are standing up against all forms of violence, we are standing up for those not receiving a Living Wage and children living in poverty, and we are standing up for a sustainable world. Whenever we do, we are Unitarians saving Jesus.