

CHAPTER THREE: GOD IN CHRIST

3.1 JESUS CHRIST AND ISRAEL

This section wants to emphasize Jesus' historical and cultural origins. To understand what Jesus says and does, we must understand where he comes from in his human world.

3.1.1 – God's choices are motivated by a creative effort of love to rebuild a broken relationship. God and humanity is a broken relationship. And because it is broken, all our other relationships are affected somehow – with other human beings, other life, and the earth. The biblical story from Genesis on, is a story of God's effort to re-establish a path toward world communion, harmony, abundance and peace. God chooses to work with specific people. That's the way relationships are formed and restored, through specific people.

Abraham and Sarah, and the people that emerge out of them become the way of God for all life in the world. The purpose of Abraham and the purpose of Israel from our Christian reading of the bible, is to become a light for all people.

3.1.2 – According to this section, the Old Testament is primarily a record of God's message and actions. God is gracious but God also makes judgements. God's message points to the One to come. God does mighty acts. What are these acts and judgements? Is it a matter of interpreting what happens? Are there other ways of interpreting what happens in life than God's judgements and acts?

3.1.3 – Now we get to Jesus and the New Testament. As Christians, we believe Jesus is God's answer of the Messiah (Saviour) to come. He is the light for all people. He is the fulfillment of what Abraham and Israel were destined to become.

3.2 JESUS CHRIST: TRULY GOD

This section is aimed at emphasizing the 'divinity' of Jesus the Christ (Messiah, Saviour). Jesus is not only equal to God, but 'very God of very God.' Jesus is not the father, yet Jesus is God as the father is God, and more. God is one even though Jesus and the father are different. What's the issue? In the ancient world of the church, there was the fear that if we talked of Jesus and the father as two different entities, people would confuse them as different gods, and even more so, Jesus as subservient or less god than God the father. What's at stake? If Jesus is less god than God, than how can his death and resurrection be our effective salvation? Only God can save us, a full God, not half of one.

But is this our issue today? If we simply saw Jesus and God the father as different, yet still part of the same reality we call God, wouldn't that work just fine? Here we come to the confusing language of the Trinity again. One in three and three in one. It's one thing to say they are one in love and one in purpose and will. It's another to say they are 'one in substance and being' as the early creeds declare.

3.2.1 – Jesus comes straight from God to be among us. But Jesus also comes from Israel and from his human conception and birth.

3.2.2 – Here the emphasis is on how the father and Jesus are one. Do these statements speak to you? To be 'begotten' rather than 'made' means Jesus does not come into being like everything else in the world that is made. Jesus has always been as God has always been. Jesus is also our way into God. We know God as Jesus reveals to us God's truest and deepest nature. Does this speak to you?

3.2.3 – Jesus is connected not just with his birth at a particular time and place in history, but also with the creation of the world as the 'Word of God.' Jesus is a person and the 'Word.' This Word is associated with God speaking creation into being in Genesis. John chapter 1 speaks of Jesus as God's Word made flesh. These are lofty words to describe a human being, but this is what we are asking people to believe as Christians. Do you believe such statements about Jesus?

3.2.4 – This is a good Trinitarian statement. The Father and the Holy Spirit are one with Jesus. But once again, how do we understand 'oneness' today? Is it more oneness of love, spirit, mind and will, or oneness in substance? Is it like different persons of the same family or different parts of one brain?

3.3 JESUS CHRIST: TRULY HUMAN

3.3.1 – One reason Jesus became human was to share our life and go through all the vulnerability, limitations, suffering that are ours as human beings. But he also became an example for us and a light for what we can yet become as human beings. Jesus became the model for our humanity. But is there something missing in this statement? What about Jesus the humanity of God sharing our life and being with us through the doubt and suffering all the way to the hell of forsakenness, in order to 'save' us from within our brokenness as one of us and raise us up toward wholeness with him?

3.4 JESUS IS SAVIOUR

This last criticism is also reflected in the following statements 3.4.2,3. Jesus suffers because of our sins. But what about Jesus as God carrying us through death to resurrection, from brokenness into a journey toward wholeness? There are different ways to understand salvation. This statement understands it in some ways and not others.

3.4.1 – Jesus is 'Mediator.' This means he 'mediates' God to us and also us to God. I understand the God to us part quite easily. The us to God part a little less so. How do we come to God through Jesus? What doors does Jesus Christ open up for us to come to God?

3.4.2 – This is a classic statement of one common way of understanding the purpose in Jesus' death. He 'bore our condemnation on the cross.' 'He suffered and was put to death for the sin of the world.' Does this make sense to you? Do you accept this

explanation as meaningful or fair? Do your sins deserve another's death? How can that help?

3.4.3 – a way of understanding Jesus' death is as an event through which God is reconciling God's self with us, since the relationship is broken by all the bad we participate in actively (what we do) and passively (what we fail to do, accept too easily or turn away from). But is such reconciliation possible through a death of someone else for us?

This statement offers some interesting biblical metaphorical expressions to describe what is achieved in the death of Jesus. Do any speak to you? Are any ones you do not understand as expressions that 'interpret the love of God' and reveal 'the gravity, cost and sure achievement of our Lord's work'?

The statement ends by re-affirming that God's reconciling, redeeming, justifying, and pardoning love is a 'mystery' we 'cannot fully explain.'

3.5 JESUS IS LORD

3.5.1 begins by giving us the narrative progression (out of the apostles' creed) – Jesus suffered, died, was buried, but then he was raised from the dead. His resurrection also leads to his ascension into heaven (where God's rule is fullest) and he is alive now as Living Lord.

What does all this mean? The rest of the statements in this section tell us.

1) The resurrection means that Jesus was not defeated, that he has defeated death and 'all evil powers which destroy and deform life.' Even though evil is still prevalent in our world, in time evil will be defeated. The resurrection is also a foretaste of the victory we will taste sometime in the future.

So then, the resurrection is a victory with only partial manifestation. We live without fear of death, knowing it cannot claim us past the grave. But evil, suffering and dying are still part of life in the world until God's kingdom comes and God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

2) But as risen and ascended Lord, Jesus is in heaven with God 'interceding before the Father on our behalf' as our 'High Priest and Advocate.' The idea here is that we are still mired in sin and need such advocacy and intercession by one who has the power to be in heaven and one worthy enough and sinless enough to represent us. This is also why we pray in Jesus' name. He is our 'mediator' as well as our 'high priest.'

How much comfort, assurance, confidence, faith and hope do such assertions offer you?

3.6 SALVATION IN CHRIST

What are we told about salvation?

It is by God's grace (free gift of love toward us which is total forgiveness and acceptance of us despite our sin) and faith is the means through which we receive such grace. Faith is the basis of a relationship with a God who is gracious to us. If we don't experience such grace, we cannot have a faith-based relationship with the God Jesus reveals. If grace is the water and God is the source, faith is the tap.

Jesus Christ fulfills a role with God we cannot fulfill. He is righteous and faithful where we are sinful and faithless. We are compromised and broken at best. Jesus stands in for us and fulfills what we cannot.

But this statement goes even further. It claims two more things.

1) God's gracious love toward us is there from before the creation. God loved us even before we were created. We were destined and chosen to be children of God, to find faith, to experience grace.

What about all those who do not have faith and have not experienced grace? Are they not destined? Has God not chosen them?

2) We have been called and convicted toward a purpose. God has a plan for us, something we are meant to achieve. God has predestined us to both salvation and growth into more mature Christians. God will work this in us one way or the other.

But why does this happen to us and not others who do not have Christian conviction? And what if we keep stumbling into sin for all our best efforts? Is God not working in us, then? Or is it our fault somehow?