

How Do We Reconcile Jesus?

Who was Jesus and why does it matter?

Introduction

I accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. Jesus died for my sins, that I might be forgiven.

Jesus Christ was born of God. For our sake he was crucified. On the third day he rose again and ascended into heaven. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.ⁱ

Now that I've got your attention, no, these are not my beliefs. But for how many of us is this our understanding of what Christianity is about? Our understanding of what Jesus is about? //

Who was Jesus and why does it matter?

The late New Testament scholar, Marcus Borg, in the introduction to his book *Speaking Christian*, describes what he calls "heaven and hell" Christianity, in which the Bible is understood literally. Unfortunately, among most non-Christians and many Christians in our country, this is the public understanding of the beliefs of all Christians. What the New Testament says about Jesus that is supernatural, that involves miracles, that involves believing that Jesus was God incarnate on earth; this is what many of us believe all Christians believe. This is not true. Progressive or liberal Christians have a much different understanding of Jesus. One can be a Christian without believing these things literally, without believing that Jesus was God incarnate, without believing in the supernatural aspects of his existence that came later to be accepted as real. And one can learn from Jesus without being Christian.

Pre-Easter and Post-Easter

New Testament scholars distinguish between the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Jesus. The Gospels, the four books of the New Testament that describe the life and teachings of Jesus, were written sometime between 65 and 140 years after Jesus birth, or one to three generations after his death.ⁱⁱ Matthew, Mark, Luke and John may or may not have been the authors. The evangelists wrote both about what had been passed down through oral tradition and about their experience of the pre-Easter and post-Easter Jesus in their communities.

Post-Easter

Let's talk about the post-Easter Jesus first. Jesus died on the cross, and on the third day he rose again from the dead. These events are marked and celebrated on Good Friday and on Easter Sunday. With this story, found in all four gospels, began much of the disbelief that occurred for many of us here who were raised Christian.ⁱⁱⁱ But those close to Jesus, grief stricken at his death, experienced his presence in some way after his crucifixion. How many of us have felt the presence of a loved one--a spouse, a child or a parent--after their passing? Whatever the source of these feelings, I imagine that this is what the disciples of Jesus felt. And in a time when the

supernatural and miracles were a part of everyday understanding of how the universe worked, these stories became embellished over time until they were written down by the evangelists. Miracles became a part of the understanding of the post-Easter Jesus, and stories of his life were embellished with miracles further and further back into his life, until finally, his conception was by direct intervention of God.

Pre-Easter

In the latter years of the twentieth century, New Testament scholars made a concerted effort to determine who the historical Jesus was, the pre-Easter Jesus, separate from the experience of Jesus by Christians.

Marcus Borg was one of these scholars. In his book *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Borg makes two negative claims regarding Jesus that fly in the face of the popular understanding of Jesus and Christianity.

The pre-Easter Jesus did not claim to be the Messiah, or in English, the Christ. Among first century Jews, the Messiah was the one promised by God to free them from oppression and deliver peace. This was how Jesus' followers saw him, not how he saw himself.^{iv, v}

The second claim Borg makes is that Jesus did not believe that there would be a supernatural coming of God as a world ending event. This view is a recent scholarly development and runs counter to scholarship of the mid-twentieth century and counter to the beliefs of literalist "heaven and hell" Christians.^{vi} The majority of NT scholars now agree that Jesus was not preaching that the end of the world was imminent.

The Facts:

Most scholars do agree on a relatively few "facts" about Jesus.

He was Jewish and grew up in Nazareth under Roman rule. He was probably born about 4 BC. His father and mother were Mary and Joseph. He had four brothers and an unknown number of sisters.^{vii, viii}

We know almost nothing factual about the life of the young Jesus, but we can make suppositions about his early life as a Jewish peasant based on other sources. He likely went to school in a synagogue. He probably became a woodworker, a profession at the lower end of the peasant social strata. With his family, he probably practiced the "common Judaism" of that time. At some point he became a religious seeker.^{ix}

The narrative starts when Jesus began his public ministry in his early thirties. He was deeply influenced by John the Baptist. For those of you not familiar with the New Testament stories, John was one of many itinerant preachers during this period of Jewish history. Jesus was with John for some period of time until John's arrest and subsequent execution by the authorities. The

hallmark of John's ministry involved repentance and baptism, or immersion in water, to wash away the sins of having broken covenantal laws. Jesus' public life began with his baptism by John.^x

His ministry lasted as little as one year, perhaps as long as four years. After a series of provocative actions in Jerusalem during the season of Passover he was executed as a threat to the rule of Rome.

Jesus was great for pithy one-liners and stories.^{xi}

He associated with marginalized people, "tax collectors and sinners." He ate his meals with outcasts and untouchables.^{xii}

He taught nonviolent resistance to exploitation and violence.^{xiii}

The center of his message had to do with the "kingdom of God", not in heaven, not in an afterlife, but here on earth. Under the rule of God on earth, i.e., if people were in relationship with God, there would be justice and peace for all.^{xiv}

These pretty much end the "facts."

Four images

Interpolating, Borg offers four broad images of Jesus. First, Jesus was a movement founder. Second, he was a spirit person. Third, Jesus was a social prophet. Finally, Jesus was a wisdom teacher.^{xv}

That Jesus was a **movement founder** is one of those statements that is so obvious that it almost doesn't deserve further elaboration. His short public ministry, only one to four years, had such an impact on those who listened to him that early Christianity was born. Over the following centuries this grew into the dominant religion of Europe and eventually became one of the major religions of the world. The founders of the other major world religions were active for decades. That Jesus had this effect in his short ministry is a measure of his personal influence and the power of his message. Is it surprising, then, that early Christians soon began to deify him, in a time when great leaders were usually regarded as gods, when the emperor of Rome was considered a god? In a time when belief in the supernatural was commonplace?

As a **spirit person**, Jesus had a deep and personal relationship with the reality of God, or said differently, with the Spirit. He was not unique in this. There have been countless others, although relatively few with the impact of Jesus. Moses, the Buddha and Mohammad come to mind. Another who comes to mind is Black Elk, the Lakota Sioux Indian whose words we heard a few weeks ago. Others I include on this list include Joan of Arc and Martin Luther King.

As a **social prophet**, Jesus criticized the elites of his day, the rulers, the religious leaders and the rich. He was advocated an egalitarian social vision in which people were treated equitably.

Remember, Jesus associated with the down and out, the people outside the purity laws such as tax collectors, lepers and the mentally ill. In contrast to the male dominated society of that time, women had leadership roles among Jesus' followers.

Because of his social advocacy, he was crucified, a form of capital punishment reserved for those who challenged imperial authority.^{xvi} Note that I did not say that he died so that we might be saved. He did not die for our sins. This diminishes the importance of his work as a social prophet. He died because he loved his community and the world and that love and compassion led him to challenge the conventional wisdom of those in authority. He died, as did Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran theologian, in Nazi Germany in 1944, as did the Roman Catholic Bishop Oscar Romero in San Salvador in 1980, as did Martin Luther King in Memphis in 1968, because he challenged the conventional wisdom of those in power.

Jesus was a **wisdom teacher**. He taught that the conventional wisdom, having to do with societal norms, power and money, was false. True wisdom was to be found through relationship with the compassion and love of God and in translating that compassion and love into one's everyday life.^{xvii}

As a wisdom teacher, Jesus taught using one-liners known as aphorisms and by stories known as parables. An aphorism invites further reflection or insight. There are more than one hundred attributed to Jesus. They would have been delivered singly and reused again and again.^{xviii}

The quote on our order of service today is one of these aphorisms. From Luke, Chapter 6, verse 44: it reads "Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush."^{xix} This will not have the same meaning for all of us, nor should it. It may mean something different to you at one time in your life than another. One way of thinking about this saying is through the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson in our reading for today. Emerson says, in part "That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and character."^{xx} "Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush."//

The Parable

Earlier this morning we heard the Parable of the Good Samaritan, found in Luke (chapter) 10:25-37. In this parable, Jesus said two things which shocked his audience. The hero of this story is a Samaritan, a member of a group who were despised by the Jews of that time. And he radically changed the definition of who was to be treated as a neighbor. The priest, the top of the religious order and the Levite, a lesser cleric, both passed by the wounded man on the roadside. The law of the Torah commanded that the Jews love their neighbor as themselves. But the definition of neighbor included only fellow Israelites. Only those who were pure, within the purity laws of Temple Judaism as practiced at that time. We don't know who the man in the ditch was, but we can guess that he wasn't an Israelite, because the religious men passed him by. The Law did not require that they love him, or put differently, that they have compassion for him. Then a member of this despised group, the Samaritans, stops to help the injured man. The Samaritan dresses his

wounds and takes him to an inn to recover. He gives the innkeeper two dinarii, the equivalent of two days wages, enough to pay for a two month stay at the inn. He tells the innkeeper to care for the man as needed. He, the Samaritan, will repay any extra funds spent. A Samaritan, a person outside of Jewish Law, a person who could not be right with God, for being outside the law, stops to help a stranger. Not a neighbor, as defined by the law, but a stranger. He does this on a road known for its bandits, where it was dangerous to stop. This man, says Jesus, loved his neighbor. He commanded those listening to do likewise. With these words, Jesus upended conventional wisdom, to be replaced by an expansive definition of compassion and love.

Many of us here aspire to compassion of this magnitude. Sometimes we come closer than others. How does this message call us to fight the fear and Islamophobia that have become our national discourse? What Jesus asked was not easy.

Conclusion

Jesus preached a difficult message to hear. It is even more difficult to live. His message requires fundamental changes in the way we conduct our lives and in how we set our priorities. I offer that there is much that we can learn from Jesus that is relevant to our present day lives, no matter our personal theology.

ⁱ The Nicene Creed, accessed 12/14/2015. <http://anglicansonline.org/basics/nicene.html>

ⁱⁱ M. Eugene Boring. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 2012. 6, 523, 633.

ⁱⁱⁱ Matt 27,28; Mark 15, 16; Luke 23, 24; John 19, 20

^{iv} SC, 94

^v MJA, 29

^{vi} MJA, 29

^{vii} Marcus Borg, *Speaking Christian*, 91-93.

^{viii} Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, 25

^{ix} MJA, 26-27.

^x New Oxford Annotated Bible, 4th ed. Mark 1.4 footnote

^{xi} SC, 91

^{xii} SC, 92

^{xiii} SC, 92

^{xiv} SC, 92

^{xv} MJA, 30

^{xvi} SC, 93

^{xvii} MJA, 85.

^{xviii} MJA, 71-73

^{xix} Luke 6.44; see also Matt 7.16

^{xx} *Singing the Living Tradition*, Beacon Press, Boston, No. 563