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# Jesus: Christ and Lord

TOM A. JONES

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Christian theology is fundamentally concerned with the issue of God and history and more specifically is rooted in Christology and the revelation of God in the person and the work of Jesus Christ. Christian theology is not a philosophy like Buddhism, though it addresses philosophical issues. It is not primarily about laws and morals like Islam, though it addresses standards and morality. It is not just about keeping a covenant relationship with God as in Judaism, though it takes that important theme to a higher level. Christian theology is all about the intersection of the present age with the age to come, the intersection of that which is of earth with that which is of heaven, the intersection of that which is temporal with that which is eternal, all in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

Astonishingly, Christian theology, which is the foundation of the religion with the most adherents on the planet, is primarily about one person. More than that, it is about one person who lived a short life even by the standards of his day and had a public ministry that lasted three years or less. Thus every Christian group is concerned with Jesus to one degree or another, and each group is powerfully shaped by its view of Jesus and the elements in his life, character and message that they choose to emphasize or ignore.

In this article, after an overview of Jesus, particularly as found in the Gospels, I will share my perspective on the view of Jesus found in the International Churches of Christ (ICOC) going back to its formative years, and how that view has affected this movement.

## KINGDOM INAUGURATOR

“The time has come,” [Jesus] said. “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1.15 NASB). Given that his earliest statements, like this one, indicated he was bringing in the long-awaited kingdom of God, it seems fair to say that the Gospel writers see Jesus as the kingdom inaugurator. In this role, Jesus does not satisfy popular and nationalistic expectations found among the Jews, but he does something more important: he fulfills the law and the prophets (Matt 5.17). He does not come, as most Jews expected, as a man of force to expel or destroy the Gentiles, but rather as a suffering servant seeking to include in the kingdom both Jews and Gentiles (Luke 24.47).

In another surprise, he does not come to bring history to an end, judge the unrighteous and replace the present age with the age to come. He comes bringing the age to come into the present age as we see in Matthew 12.28: “But when I force out demons by the power of God’s Spirit, it proves that God’s kingdom has already come to you” (CEV).

The same message is seen in Luke 17.20–21. The Pharisees asked Jesus when the kingdom of God would come, to which he answered, “The kingdom of God is not coming with something observable; no one will say, ‘Look here!’ or ‘There!’ For you see, the kingdom of God is among you” (HCSB).

While Jesus would eventually speak of another and future coming when the kingdom would be brought to complete fulfillment, his primary focus was on living a “kingdom life” in the present age and calling

his disciples to do the same (Matt. 6.10). He promised that when his followers lived this countercultural life, more or less as aliens from the future, they would often receive the same response that Jesus received. This meant those that accepted the summons of the kingdom must expect to be persecuted in this world (Matt 5.10–12). This fact was given a surprising amount of emphasis in Jesus' teaching, but is really not so surprising, when we consider that the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world are so diametrically opposed (John 18.36)—a truth increasingly ignored in post-Constantine Christendom.

In the minds of some thinkers, Jesus has been seen as primarily a great ethical teacher, but they often miss the fact that his moral principles all are rooted in his understanding of the kingdom and the concept of doing God's will on earth as it is in heaven (Matt 6.10). Without an understanding and acceptance of his eschatology, so much that he says seems foolish and defies what we call common sense.

Maybe the best summary of Jesus' message is found in Matthew 4.23 where we are told he "went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people."

#### LORD AND KING

Within the concept of the kingdom is the idea of submission to the king. The Jews knew that in their scriptures God is often described as the king. What they were most unprepared for and even scandalized by was the idea that a man like one of them would see himself as the Lord and King.

However, Jesus makes far too many statements for us to fail to see that this is just the way he viewed himself (Mark 2.10, Luke 7.36–50, John 8.24, Matt 26.27–28, to list just a few). This was not lost on the Jewish leaders who felt they had all the evidence they needed to accuse him of blasphemy (Mark 2.7, 14.64).

Because of his self-understanding, Jesus expected what is from one perspective a logical commitment, but from another is a most radical one. He expected all who wanted to follow him to love him more than the closest relationships in their lives (Matt 10.37–39). Judging from the statements found in Matthew 16.24, Mark 8.34 and Luke 9.23 about the necessity for disciples to deny themselves, take up the cross and follow him, Jesus never envisioned disciples who would be anything but totally committed to him and to his cause. So radical was this kingdom life he called for that one should not accept it until he first counted the significant cost most carefully (Luke 14.25–33).

To call him "Lord" was itself a bold move, but Jesus could not be satisfied with that. He ended his sermon on the kingdom, speaking of those who would call him "Lord, Lord," and who did various things in his name, but did not really submit to the reign of God and thus never knew him. He states that at the judgment he will say, "Away from me, you evildoers" (Matt 7.23). In so many words, he was saying, "You are religious phonies and you are not with me." These are strong words indeed.

#### SAVIOR AND GOOD NEWS PROCLAIMER

However, if we think it was left to Paul to develop the concept of grace and a kinder and gentler side of Christian thinking, we would be wrong. The Jesus who called everyone to yield to the reign of God also spoke of the good news of that reign. He claimed to be fulfilling the words of Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to preach good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to release the oppressed,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4.17–19)

Those who saw their great need, not those who could produce a list of their accomplishments, would belong to the kingdom (Matt 5.3). Those who faced their sin with a godly sorrow would find great comfort and consolation (Matt 5.4).

The kingdom is like a place where those who make less than a quarter a day spiritually owe a debt of \$10 million, and pitifully ask for just a little more time to repay. Though such a request is laughable and their plight is far more desperate than they acknowledge, the master gives them mercy and forgives all the debt, expecting them to go and show such grace to others (Matt 18.21–27).

The kingdom is like a family in which a selfish son lives foolishly and disastrously. When he eventually returns penitently to his father, just hoping to work as a hired man, he sees his father running to embrace him and treating him with lavish grace, even before he can get his apology out of his mouth (Luke 15.11–24).

Jesus preached what Andrew Greeley has called “the insanely generous love of God,”<sup>1</sup> or what I have called in another place “God’s extravagant generosity.”<sup>2</sup> Though we do not have a record of Jesus using the word “grace,” so much that he taught and did is an ample foundation for what Paul and others would say on this subject.

In a similar way, there is no full-blown development of soteriology or a doctrine of the atonement in the Gospels, but it is clear that Jesus understands that people will enter the kingdom because of his sacrifice and suffering (Matt 20.27–28).

His preaching is bold and uncompromising, but he repudiates worldly leadership. He leads not with intimidation and harshness but as a servant who willingly suffers to bear the burden of sin for others, thus fulfilling Isaiah’s vision (Isa 53). He understands that bringing people to the kingdom means seeking and saving those who are lost (Matt 19.10).

#### DISCIPLE MAKER

Very early in the Gospels we find Jesus speaking to people and using the words “follow me.” Like other teachers of his day he wanted to make disciples. He wanted to enlist others who would come to him to learn his ways and his message, so they could be sent out to reproduce both.

After his disciples saw heaven and earth intersect most dramatically and the kingdom come with power in the resurrection, Jesus gave a charge to make disciples of all nations. In one form or another all four Gospels contain some form of the so-called “Great Commission” that we are most familiar with at the end of Matthew.

Though tiny in number and up against formidable odds even greater than we face today, the early church took seriously this calling and sought to fulfill it, though it brought, as Jesus predicted, persecution, suffering and death. So robust were their efforts that historian Thomas Cahill has observed, “By the middle of the first century throughout the Roman Empire a crucified man was worshipped as a god.”<sup>3</sup> That is a truth amazing in more ways than one.

#### CHURCH BUILDER

While most of the emphasis in the Gospels is on Jesus as the inaugurator of the kingdom, there is the one reference to his plan to build his church (Matt 16.17–18). Though the church is not the kingdom, it will play the key role in spreading the kingdom, and ideally be the colony of citizens of heaven in which the world will see the kingdom being lived out and proclaimed on earth.

1. Andrew Greeley, *The Jesus Myth* (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1971), 47.

2. Thomas A. Jones, *No One Like Him* (Spring Hill, TN: DPI, 2002.), 86.

3. For at least five years, I have referenced the following book for this idea: Thomas Cahill, *Desire of the Everlasting Hills: The World Before and After Jesus* (New York: Nan A. Talese, 1999). However, in completely rereading the book, I am unable to find such a quote. Perhaps this was originally my own summary of other things Cahill says.

I mention it here not because it gets lots of copy in the Gospels, but because of the large role it will play in the rest of the New Testament and in later movements, including our own.

#### JESUS IN THE INTERNATIONAL CHURCHES

In my more than twenty-five years of experience with the Churches of Christ, I saw Jesus was primarily painted as the builder of the church and the giver of a plan of salvation. Contrary to earlier “restoration” thinking in the Stone-Campbell Movement, the kingdom and the church were often seen as the same thing, and little was made of the fact that the kingdom was the breaking in of a new order of life from the age to come. Instead, it was more an institution to be conducted according to a certain blueprint.

In such a milieu, the focus shifted away from the person of Jesus and the kingdom life to the institutional church and to keeping the details of the plan.

- Conversion usually involved an acceptance of certain doctrines, much more than a vital encounter with a living Jesus and entrance into a new way that was totally alien to the world.
- A vital relationship with Jesus and his sovereignty in one’s personal life was not an emphasis, nor was daily prayer for the kingdom to come fresh to one’s life.
- The concept of discipleship was almost non-existent. (I had to be introduced to that idea through the writings of a German Lutheran who was despairing over the loss of it in his own denomination.<sup>4</sup>)

The Campus Ministry Movement in Churches of Christ sprang up within a broader culture showing fresh interest in Jesus. “The Jesus movement” was attracting thousands of young people, but was strong on emotion and weak on substance. Our movement was probably influenced by that enthusiasm, but was an effort to bring renewal where apathy was often seen in the Churches of Christ. Consequently it involved an attraction to some of the more radical elements in Jesus’ teaching, especially those texts that called for a high level of commitment.

The Lordship of Jesus in one’s personal life quickly became a key concern, and Jesus’ statements about self-denial, cross bearing and giving up everything to be his disciple were translated into the call for a “total commitment.” Later on this would give way to the question: “Do you want to be a disciple?” which would be asked after various texts defining and explaining that term were studied (e.g., Luke 9.34, John 8.31–32, John 13.34–35). With the passage of time, the term “disciple” came to be preferred over the term “Christian” since it was Jesus’ term of choice and was more specifically explained in scripture. Most people we reached out to thought of themselves as Christians almost by default, but being a disciple required a decision.

Early on in the movement there was an effort to “make disciples” and avoid the shallow understanding we believed many had in “coming to Christ” in both Churches of Christ and the Jesus movement. It was felt it was not right to bring someone to baptism unless they had a good understanding of how this was a commitment for Jesus to be Lord of one’s entire life. It was felt that the typical teaching in Churches of Christ had neglected this aspect of the message, resulting in churches with very low expectations and many members who were baptized without repentance. Jesus taught that the cost needed to be counted, and this became part of our standard practice.

Several key leaders in the movement’s early days did not want to repeat the mistake seen in Churches of Christ of the fifties and sixties, of putting almost no emphasis on grace. A study of the Letter to the Romans was common fare for a long time, and those known as stalwarts of grace, such as K. C. Moser, were brought in to speak at early conferences. Most of the emphasis, however, was put on Paul’s message and not Jesus’. Over time, as leadership influence shifted to those with no knowledge of the dangers of

4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: The Macmillian Company, 1959).

“graceless” preaching, some of us were concerned about a drift toward a performance-based orientation that failed to show the connection between grace and discipleship. Thankfully, in recent years we have seen that corrected, though danger always lurks among groups that preach a strong commitment.

A theology of the kingdom of God was carried over from the Churches of Christ that saw the kingdom primarily in institutional (and sadly, very sectarian) terms, not in character and spiritual terms. A study of the kingdom that involved a good deal of *eisegesis* was done with potential converts, primarily to get them to commit to the church and to think of it in global terms. Disciples need to be committed to the church and to think globally, but in handling scripture, the end does not justify the means. It was a bad precedent.

With a lack of proper emphasis on the kingdom in its full eschatological sense came a lack of emphasis on the Sermon on the Mount and the full kingdom life. While we have fully embraced the idea that Jesus’ message is radical, we have not been as devoted to teaching everything he commanded—including those most radical parts of the sermon on non-resistance and loving our enemies. We must come to see these not as quirky or peripheral commands left to each man’s conscience, but as something entirely consistent with living in the present age by the principles of the age to come (Isa 2.3–4).

We as a movement have not fully explored kingdom theology. However, because of at least three reasons I expect we will see change here: (1) our respect for the Lordship of Jesus, (2) a track record of being open to new teaching, and (3) the international character of our churches where kingdom citizenship trumps nationalistic ideas.

Of great importance is that those in the movement began to look to Jesus’ example with his disciples to see what the relationships within the church ought to be. Eventually, there was much more concern that the church demonstrate John 13.34–35 (“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”) and the other “one another” passages, rather than it include the right acts of worship and the right nomenclature for leaders, though those were still thought to be important.

Since being a disciple was a primary focus, these “one another” relationships were seen as God’s plan for helping all to grow in their discipleship. Much good was done in “discipling” relationships, except in cases where there was a lack of mutuality and where one person began to exercise authority over another in a worldly way that Jesus had renounced. Unfortunately this tendency began to be seen in many leaders, which, of course, eventually meant that a problem developed throughout the fellowship. Attempts were made to clarify the biblical approach. Books were written with a healthy balance, and they made some impact. However, habits can be slow to change, and in some cases did not change until the events of 2003, when there was not only change but some serious overreaction in which the baby went out with the bathwater. After some time of reflection, most in our family of churches have seen that there can be no care for new Christians and no consistent maturing of those in the body without healthy “one another” relationships being encouraged and implemented among the members.

From its very inception the movement that led to the ICOC has been highlighting the Great Commission and the call to take the gospel to the entire world. It first saw tremendous growth among college students, and it would be those students who ten or so years later would start planting churches around the globe. Almost always lacking in any preparation in cross-cultural communication, but fueled by passion and faith, they planted churches in the major cities of more than 170 nations in a period of twenty years. While serious mistakes were made and some of those churches were lost, the great majority of them endured, and almost all are now completely led by nationals. (Much more on this can be found in Roger Lamb’s article.)

For the most influential leader of the movement, sadly, the public message became more and more about how the movement was growing and what shape it was taking. Failing to see the self-effacing nature of kingdom leadership, he was highlighting the importance of his leadership. The message focused less and less on how God had acted in Jesus, and more and more focused on how God was revealed in the

movement. This leader is no longer a part of our churches, and a more Jesus-focused message is being preached. The degree to which we keep that focus will largely determine how successful we will be at showing the kingdom of God to the world.

While God's discipline was needed and while corrections have been necessary, a great deal of good has been done. There is today a culture in the ICOC where we expect to hear how radical God's grace is, and how radical our response to his extravagant generosity is to be. If the message starts sounding like a call to be a nice church, most of our people become alarmed. They know this is not the Jesus they signed up to follow. We expect to be challenged to care for the poor and called into serious relationships where we are eagerly seeking help in changing to be like Jesus, and we expect to keep working for the evangelization of our neighborhoods and cities and the whole world, knowing this will often bring a negative response (2 Cor 2.15–16). We have much to learn about life in the kingdom, but for the most part there is still a hunger to keep going to Jesus, who is the one who must teach us.

**TOM A. JONES** WAS THE FOUNDING EDITOR OF *DISCIPLESHIP PUBLICATIONS INTERNATIONAL* AND IS THE AUTHOR OF TEN BOOKS INCLUDING *NO ONE LIKE HIM: JESUS AND HIS MESSAGE* (DPI, 2003).

