

## **Jesus in North America (12)**

### **The Fatherless Jesus (conclusion)**

The United States is the most diverse religious nation on earth. Non-Christian religions are influencing even Christians. For instance, nearly one-quarter of the Christians in the United States believe in reincarnation. There is also much confusion about the identity of Jesus Christ. The American Jesus is something of a chameleon. He has been called black and white, male and female, straight and gay, a socialist and a capitalist, a pacifist and a warrior, a guru and a superstar. In fact, often he has been reduced to no more than an admirable kind of a guy, like the Dalai Lama. This cultural Jesus is a shadow of the biblical Son of God, but the public is drawn to Him nonetheless. In his *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon*, Stephen Prothero observes: "In the United States, Jesus is widely hailed as the 'King of Kings.' But it is a strange sort of sovereign... the American Jesus is more a pawn than a king, pushed around in a complex game of cultural (and countercultural) chess, sacrificed here for this cause and there for another."

From the 18th century to the present, scholars from within the visible church communities have undermined the person of Christ. The influence of theological liberalism as a movement has been and is poisonous. Retired Episcopal Bishop Spong, for example, claims that the doctrine of the virgin birth helped to foster the oppression of women. None of these liberal trends surprise the discerning Christian. But Jesus Christ is still the centre of history. In *Jesus Through the Centuries: His place in the History of Culture*, Jaroslav Pelikan notes: "The dates of history and biography are marked as A.D. and B.C., according to 'the years of Our Lord.' Even the life of an Antichrist is dated by the dates of Christ, biographies of his enemies have been written this way, so that we speak of Nero as having died in A.D. 68 and of Stalin as having died in A.D. 1953. In this sense at any rate, and not only in this sense, everyone is compelled to acknowledge that because of Jesus of Nazareth history will never be the same."

Who is the Jesus of the Scripture? In his *The Forgotten Father*, Thomas A. Smail raises the question: "Is the traditional answer that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God incarnate and made man, still necessary or indeed possible; can we, or indeed must we learn to speak of him in other categories which will preserve all that matter of the New Testament witness, but will we be intelligible and significant to modern man in the world of the twentieth century?" We can and must address this question by unpacking the meaning of the Gospel. The Gospel does neither start with Jesus in the manger nor with the crucifixion and resurrection, but with the *Father* who loved the world so much that He gave His only Son in His Spirit (John 3:16).

### **God Names Himself**

We have no right to give God a name or names. God named himself in Scriptural revelation. He calls Himself Father both in the Old and New Testament. The Old Testament begins to define God's fatherhood in a way that is in deliberate and fundamental contradiction with the pagan ideas of goddesses and gods. Jesus called God – his Father. Jesus said, "pray then in

this way: Our Father in heaven..." (Matt. 6:9). On the cross Jesus called out in a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). And when in the Spirit, we dare to call the holy God - Abba! "And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" (Gal. 4:6). Thus the Father has a Son, whose name is Jesus. This truth leads us to discuss the doctrine of the Trinity.

## The Trinity

The affirmation of the doctrine of the Trinity is controversial as it stands over against all cultural perspectives on God. Mainline Protestantism is functionally Unitarian rather than Trinitarian. Evangelicals often so over-emphasize Jesus that He seems Fatherless. Sects and cults may believe in a Jesus, but he is not the Son of the Father. What makes us think that God is Triune? There is only one answer: because this is the way the Father made himself known through his Son Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Lord of the Church, Jesus Christ, gives us language to speak about the Triune God.

Jesus is who He is, and was both accepted and rejected as such "because he called God his own Father making himself equal with God." Their relationship forms the basis for how we understand that Jesus, as incarnate Son, is divine. Jesus is one with the Father. Already early in His ministry, Jesus expressed a deep intimacy with his Father. He said: "All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal" (Matt. 11:27). Chapters 14-17 of the gospel of John take us into the heart of this union between Jesus and the Father. "The words I say to you, I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that *I am in the Father and the Father is in me.*" And the time will come when Christ "hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power" (1 Cor. 15:24). "When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28)

God not only acts in history as Father, Son and Spirit, He is in Himself Father, Son and Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the Gift of the Father through the Son to the church. Jesus sends Him to live in our hearts, to be the glue between us and Himself. The doctrine of the Trinity was enshrined in the Nicene Creed. Through most of Christian history, the doctrine of the Trinity has been the unquestioned – and unquestionable – touchstone of orthodox faith and teaching. It has given its outline to systematic theologies like the *Institutes* of John Calvin, to catechisms and to sermons. It is central for our salvation.

## The Atonement

This brings us to the centrality of the cross. With all our cultural and technological wealth, we are still sinners in the need of the Saviour. Salvation is a movement that originated in the heart of the Father. Small comments that the love of the Father sending, empowering, guiding, finally vindicating His Son, and the love of the Son, coming, obeying, suffering, and

dying, are particular historical expressions of the love that eternally flows between Father and Son at the heart of the life of God.

Jesus is the narrow gate (Matt. 7:13,14). The apostle Peter proclaimed, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." Augustine wrote, "The pride of man may be cured through the humility of God" in the person and life of Jesus Christ. The consequence for rejecting the Name is stark. The Bible speaks of the wrath of God in terms every bit as personal, as it speaks of the love of God. Jesus Himself says more about hell than anyone else in the Bible. Other parts of the Bible dare to paint frightening pictures. For example, they speak of "torment with burning sulfur in the presence of holy angels and the Lamb" (Rev. 14:6-20).

In his essay *Jesus Christ: The Unique One*, John H. Armstrong notes, "The New Testament quite plainly sets before us a Jesus who is truly man and truly God. Whether we believe this or not makes an eternal difference. And this revelation of God, in the person of Jesus is final. It is also superior to all other revelation(s). There is nothing more vital for the renewal of the church in our time than a rediscovery of centrality of the person of Christ."

## **Repentance**

Jesus, the Son of God and the Son of Man, never sugarcoats His message. He calls sinners to repentance (Mark 1:15). This call does not include promises of intimacy with God or having one's deepest needs met. Repent is not a word one uses in polite company anymore. Cartoonists picture a dishevelled, bearded man carrying a sign that says, "Repent! The world is about to end." It is a clever caption and guarantees a chuckle. Sadly, in most churches today a preacher finds it difficult to use the word repent in a serious vein. In North America it has become so easy to change churches if the message is not "comfortable."

## **Conclusion**

Who is Jesus Christ? When Christians neglect the Fatherhood of God, they will eventually lose the Son. As Smail remarked, "A Father who is not the Father of Jesus will not long continue to be a Father to us; a Jesus who is not the Son of God will not long continue to be the Saviour of men." To address the Trinitarian God, we must come through the Son of the Father who is revealed by the Holy Spirit. Only in Jesus Christ can we know God fully, only in Him can we experience the fullest joy (John 15:9-11). In sum, how else can one say than "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28), and "Thanks be to God the Father for His indescribable gift" (2 Cor.9:15)?

Johan D. Tangelder