

Does Christianity need Jesus anymore?



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

A provocative title to be sure, but I invite the reader to follow my reasoning. Though we often hear Christian believers quote Jesus of Nazareth, it seems that most Christian theology and personal beliefs can be traced to the Apostle Paul rather than Jesus himself. As radical as it sounds, imagine removing the Gospels from the Bible but keeping Paul's letters (other writings are optional). Would we still have the Christian religion? I think so. In fact, I think the religion we see today reflects that.

As I see it, a significant segment of Christians worship Christ perhaps more than honor the man Jesus. As strange as that appears, the statement almost sounds natural and normal, doesn't it? Once the Palestinian rabbi had "Christ" added to his name, he became an exalted object of worship (some might say, an idol). Over the long and confusing history of the Christian Church (note it isn't the "Jesus Church"), we could say that theology trumps practice; belief is superior to a life of compassionate service as modeled by the Nazarene. In other words, a supernatural being high in the heavens became the primary focus for the faithful. This has serious consequences.

This is not to say many who claim to be "followers of Jesus" haven't found great motivation in the "servant model" of Jesus portrayed in the Gospels. Much good

has been done and continues to be done in the humanitarian acts of these followers. We might ask then, how can a person emulate a supernatural deity? That is, how can a person "live like Christ" — conduct their life like a god? Paul certainly instructs his early converts to live "Christ-like" lives, treating other Christians as they wish to be treated (compare Jesus' teaching, which wasn't just about treating fellow Christians well — besides, he was speaking to Jews, there were no Christians then). Put simply, Paul and his followers were, as we used to say, "so heavenly minded they were no earthly good." The early church (Christ/Paul followers) didn't need to worry about social programs for the poor or organizing long-term goals to make the world better. They would soon see Christ and join him in the sky. Goodbye to earth and earthly cares; goodbye to Jesus. After all, as I often point out, none of these people, including Paul, ever met a man named Jesus. (I suggest we think long and hard about that).

So, does Christianity still require the historical Jesus to keep the engine running? I don't think so. It seems nonsensical to think that a man named Jesus walked around a small patch of the planet 2,000 years ago, spending all his time pointing up, into the clouds — his whole life and teaching was about "Up There." "Down Here" didn't matter much, otherwise why not live a full life performing more amazing feats, raising more dead people and healing the world? Why a mere 33 years, and only a three year "ministry"? (and why make it a secret what he did from age 12-30? — no lessons to leave us from those 18 years?).

Here's a shocker: as a secular person, I say let's get back to Jesus. Let the Christ part go; it wasn't his last name anyway (yes, I know, one passage has Peter say-

ing he was "The Christ (Messiah), Son of the Living God," but how did Jesus respond? Tell no one!). We can disagree whether he did supernatural things or was raised from the dead, but once again, where is the focus of faith, on the extraordinary and unexplainable, or on how the human community can live more harmoniously and humanely? I'd have many questions for the man Jesus, but I'd stand and applaud after his lecture on the mountain, or his encouragement to show compassion with the most vulnerable people and stay centered on love. Was the message truly about a god floating through the world, or a call to a different kind of "faith"? Could we say "faith" isn't so much theological as practical — more about what we do, not what we believe? Isn't that the "faith" Jesus exemplified?

At times, Jesus of Nazareth referred to himself as the "Son of Man" — Child of Humankind. Though this was a spiritually-charged term, I suppose what I would call for is more "Son of Humanity" and less "Son of God." Emphasizing his humanity (as heretics have tried for centuries) would revolutionize Christian practice and perhaps even eliminate the need to use the term "Christian" any longer, rendering it obsolete. After all, as I see it, Jesus himself has, in a sense, become obsolete — a ritualized relic — made invisible in the shadow of the God-Christ who gets the sacred spotlight.

Where is Jesus in Christianity?

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