

# WHAT KIND OF CHRISTIAN — PART II

## PREFACE: WHO'S GOT WHICH JESUS?

*Drop kick me Jesus through the goal posts of life  
End over end neither left nor to right  
Straight through the heart of them righteous uprights  
Drop kick me Jesus through the goal posts of life.*

Country western singer, Bobby Bare

St. Xavier High in Cincinnati has a helluva football team, but the all-boys Catholic school is still muzzled by their administration with regard to what are permissible cheers from the bleachers during game time. So when rival Colerain high school team broke their winning streak by missing a 45-yard field goal attempt during the last minute of a recent game, and the best thing the losers could do was console themselves chanting, "We got girls!" Xavier fans resorted to the only comeback they had left as the ultimate victor's cry, "Well, we got Jesus!"

Apparently that was too much for Colerain's coach, Tom Bolden. He could respect the talents of their star quarterback, the superior skill of their wide receivers, and the solid strength of their defensive linemen. But claiming divine favor? "That's where I've got to draw the line," Bolden was caught saying on some amateur video. "They ought to be embarrassed."

Do you ever find yourself wishing you coulda' been there, to offer a better comeback line? What about, "We got girls, and we got Jesus too!" Even better, I bet the Xavier Bomber's could have stumped and stupefied Colerain's Cardinals if they'd fired back a more astute, "And exactly which Jesus have you got?" For truth be told, the Jesus I've come to know from the gospel traditions is one that seemed to find himself on the side of more losers than winners.

In fact, figuring out *which* Jesus is *your* Jesus may be the key to understanding the title you might accord him as *Christ*, and exactly what *kind* of Christian you may be. But first, a look

at the context of the question, from both a contemporary and historical point of view.

## I. WHAT KIND OF CHRISTIAN? ORGANIZED OR DISORGANIZED?

More often than not, to hear the public media and secular press tell it, aren't Christians all alike? They're typically conservative, fundamentalist/literalist, judgmental, and -- when exposed to the light of day -- hypocritical. Either that, or they're establishment types, with some nominal affiliation to a dwindling mainline denominational institution; or a relatively small radical fringe that takes the gospel's social/communal agenda so seriously that it proves itself to be mainstream-averse.

More and more these days, however, the diversity of so-called "designer" religion is observed to be increasingly pervading the spiritual landscape. Newly released research outlined in statistical expert George Barna's new book *Futurecast*, tracks the rise of both the "un-churched" and emerging forms of personal religious expression.

"America is headed for 310 million people with 310 million religions," he says. "We want everything customized to our personal needs -- our clothing, our food, our education. Now it's our religion. People say, 'I believe in God. I believe the Bible is a good book. And then I believe whatever I want.'"

Barna critiques churches still peddling an old familiar message that has gone 'round in circles for centuries: "Jesus is the answer.

Accept him. Say this little Sinners Prayer and keep coming back.' It doesn't work. People end up bored, burned out and empty," Barna says. "They look at church and wonder, 'Jesus died for this?'"

Barna's research indicates a downtrend in all areas of religious belief and behavior, except two: More people claim they have accepted Jesus as their savior (whatever that means); and second, more expect to go to heaven (whatever that means).

[Sep 13, 2011 ... By Cathy Lynn Grossman, USA TODAY]

This suggests a couple things. One is the spiritual questions and yearnings about ultimate value and meaning – along with the mythic, metaphorical and even liturgical ways we find to illumine them – are both *irrepressible and ever changing*.

And secondly, as a result, it does not lend itself well to permanent institutionalization, but is a universal phenomenon forever *in process*. [Pilgrims on a journey, on "pathways" that may lead us from where we are to where we long to be, is a good way to describe it!]

To look at a contemporary counterpart to Barna's latest research in American Christianity, one can look at what's happening in the new emerging world super power, China; where Christianity is permitted in state-sanctioned churches, and where Catholicism and Protestantism are designated by the state as two separate religions. So, when it comes to designating what *kind* of Christian you might be, in the eyes of the State apparently that suffices!

These churches report to the State Administration for Religious Affairs, and are forbidden to take part in any religious activity outside their places of worship. They adhere to the slogan, "Love the country - love your religion." ... And, in return the Party promotes atheism in schools but undertakes "to protect

and respect religion until such time as religion itself will disappear."

Interestingly enough however, these (official numbers of state sanctioned churches) are dwarfed by unofficial "house churches" spreading across the country. Both the state-sanctioned institutionalized form of Christianity and the State itself feel threatened. The official "churches of accommodation" fear the house churches' fervor may provoke a government backlash; because what the authorities consider non-negotiable is the *disorganized* house churches' refusal to acknowledge any official authority over their organization. It leads me to wonder, is it merely some anti-authoritarian sentiment that's going on; or some other intrinsic longing of the human heart? A BBC reporter offers his findings from his recent assignment:

An educated young Christian described her church to me: "We have 50 young professionals in this house church. Everyone is so busy working, you don't have time socializing, and even if you are socializing, you are putting on a fake face. But in house church people feel warm, they feel welcome... they feel people really love them so they really want to join the community, a lot of people come for this."

For these Chinese, in the stampede to get rich, trust in institutions, trust between individuals, trust between the generations, is breaking down. As one of China's most eminent philosophers of religion - Professor He Guanghu, at Renmin University in Beijing put it to me: "The worship of Mammon... has become many people's life purpose. I think it is very natural that many other people will not be satisfied... will seek some meaning for their lives so that when Christianity falls into their lives, they will seize it very tightly."

[Christians in China: Is the country in spiritual crisis? by Tim Gardam, BBC Radio 12 September 2011]

These two new studies in the U.S. and China suggest an old story that is still finding new forms of expression; namely, that alternate (disorganized) forms of searching for a way to live more authentic and ultimately meaningful lives is a universal experiential context for any religious tradition. One can look at the two

kinds of Christianity evolving or devolving today, organized and “disorganized” or non-institutionalized. More so, one can also see how this has always been the case when it comes to asking what *kind* of Christianity you’re talking about. Just go back to the beginning ...

### III. THE FIRST CHRISTIANS, THE GOSPEL TRADITIONS AND DIFFERENT “CHRISTS”

As much as it seems we have tried to do sometimes, it’s difficult to try to figure out what kind of Christianity we may be talking about, without figuring out which Jesus we’re talking about. If Jesus, the Christ (messiah, “anointed one”), is understood in any way to be the ultimate manifestation of God in human experience (that is, *the* “Christ” above all others), then we must start and end with him.

This would be easy, if only there was a single shared experience of who this Jesus “really” was, and still *is* for all those who would claim to follow him, believe in him, ascribe their allegiance to him as Lord and Savior, wisdom teacher and wondrous healer, channel of restorative and transformative love and grace. Regrettably or not, this is not the case.

Sometimes, when we peel away the layers of tradition found in both the canonical and non-canonical gospel accounts and other early writings of the emerging Christian faith, we find there’s little left of what can be ascribed to the historical figure of Jesus as authentic. From there, we can look for some common character traits and how early followers lives were experientially impacted by this spirit sage, otherwise unknown to us.

In this sense, one could say there were Christians before the historical Jesus ever ended up nailed to a cross. Jesus’ followers had not only already begun imitating his itinerant ministry of healing and controversial

teaching amongst the Galilean peasant class before his ignominious execution; but the intentional efforts to extinguish the flame already set ablaze in their hearts.

For example, take the Jesus character portrayed in the synoptic gospels who asks his closest associates who the crowds think he is, then who they think he is. When Peter gives the correct answer – namely, that he has come to believe Jesus is the Christ -- his “confession” is regarded by most biblical scholars to be a confessional proclamation of the early church.

The message being conveyed is clear. The early years of persecution that followed Jesus’ death failed to silence the message of the messianic messenger. Instead, it only spawned a new wave of this radical Jewish sect; where there were soon a variety of early Christian communities telling their own stories of interpretation and application of the immutable, irrepressible presence of a “living Jesus” that remained to be experienced.

What this means, of course, is that there were different *kinds* of Christians from the very start. The quest and challenge therefore to discern what might be the most authentic Christ for any one community or another would result in a dynamic hodge-podge of groups; eventually distinguished either by their claims of exclusive authority and orthodoxy (“right-thinking”), or the irrepressible spiritual sojourn of the individual believer that eventually subverts such human enterprises.

That is, efforts to homogenize these different kinds of Christian communities followed the natural human inclination to domesticate and demarcate a good thing through institutionalization. Such was the case when the emperor Constantine credited his military victory over his rival Maxentius near Rome’s Milvian Bridge in 312 C.E., to Jesus (the) Christ.

He subsequently converted to what had previously been outlawed and persecuted Christianity; in a word chanting, "We've got Jesus!" Jesus the Victor not only became the empire's new religion; but its unifying principle for political stability, as well. One could speculate whether Constantine bowed down before this Jesus, or merely put him in his back pocket?

So it was that in 333 C.E., Constantine ordered the Church's bishops to meet in Nicea, to iron out their theological differences and expunge any dissonant heresies. There was to be only one *kind* of Christian, as defined by an orthodox creed. Such articles of belief would be sanctioned (and in this sense controlled) by the State.

So pleased was the emperor with the results that, at the conclusion of their meeting, the ecclesiastical hierarchy was treated to an imperial banquet, while armed guards kept the religious riff-raff out behind locked doors.

For a moment, recall how the early gospel traditions had once recorded variations of Jesus' portrayals of the imminent banquet of an in-breaking reign of God; where the formal guest list was thrown, the least likely ushered in, and those with highest rank cautioned against assuming seats of honor at the head table.

Indiscriminate bands of Christians had once gathered secretly in homes to share how this Jesus "character" of God – for all intents and purposes, a loser, dead and gone – was still somehow alive for them. It had taken less than three centuries for a disorganized orphan faith to get adopted by the state; and organized to the point of an institution constructing a confessional formula about what to believe about a "personhood" of God, now elevated to co-equal status with the divine.

In some ways, the pendulum that swings between formal and informal, the organized

and disorganized, the institutionalized and free-form (otherwise known sometimes as emerging or progressive forms nowadays), has progressed in some ways. Heretics are generally no longer burned at the stake. Even China has discovered it can't control certain *kinds* of Christianity it doesn't even want to acknowledge exists.

But, as important as it is to distinguish between the different kinds of Christianity, it seems equally clear there will always be sufficient variety that makes it difficult to lump us all together.

A short while ago, before the latest prediction by some zealous Bible believers the final apocalypse was at hand, and instead the rapture came and went like a giant bubble of hot air, San Francisco Chronicle columnist Jon Carroll wrote,

"We must all remember this as the apocalypse approaches: Not all Christians are evangelicals, and not all evangelicals are nutballs. They do not look to the sky for signs. Believing that this year's earthquake or tornado or bridge collapse has a specific external God-related meaning is a fringe belief. The fringe is loud; in Republican politics, it could be decisive. But it's the fringe."

Setting aside the partisan jab, the reminder was nonetheless helpful and important. The question remains nonetheless, what *kind* of Christian might you be? Here's a key.

#### IV. WHICH JESUS HAVE YOU GOT? OR, WHICH JESUS HAS GOT YOU?

If Christians nevertheless declare that he (Jesus) was the "anointed one," it is only by redefining the role of the "anointed one" to fit what Jesus actually did. To be authentically Christian is to be Christocentric. That can take many forms, and Christians can argue passionately as to whether the center is the life and teaching of Jesus, the apostolic witness to Jesus, the cross as effecting atonement, the resurrection as demonstrating a unique relation to God, or incarnation as presenting God to us in and through a human being.

*Christian faith watered down?* John Cobb, Jr.,  
Monthly journal, July, 2011

Some scholars will talk about the Jesus of history and Christ of faith. Others will distinguish between the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Jesus. Educated types well versed in biblical studies, as well as everyday folks who just read any one of a number of translations of the Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts, will read the similarities and differences in the various gospel narratives about the Jesus character portrayed, and take them as literal/historical, or interpret them metaphorically or sacramentally.

Some will interpret the varying accounts of Jesus' itinerant life and brief ministry through the lens of the "priestly" motif of temple sacrifice and atonement (Lamb of God). Others will see the restorative life of Jesus the good shepherd, who gathers the lost, even those beyond the pale; and brings them out of exile, returning home rejoicing. Still others will see in Jesus the transformative exodus of liberation from bondage to freedom, from death to new life. So, which Jesus have you got?

But in every case, in asking what *kind* of Christian one may be, there's an underlying presupposition and a back-story. And the back-story is the Jesus story. Who do you think Jesus was, what's his story, as near as we can figure it?

When the Jesus portrayed in the various gospels bids every day folk to follow him, who is it that is beckoning them? Beckoning us? And, though I may say I'm a follower of a *certain* Jesus I've come to know as best I can, I am not a *Jesus-ite*. I'm some kind of *Christian*. I have placed my bets on these characters, and have accorded this ancient spirit sage the title Christ. And to him, I have lent my tenuous, curious, questioning, challenging allegiance.

Not only that, but truth be told, I've been at this long enough to acknowledge I used to be *one* kind of Christian, and now I'm quite a

different kind. Not only that, considering the path I realize I've been on for some time now, I suspect I'm not done with the *what-kind-of-Christian* question; but instead find myself confronted with a Jesus character that I take to be the face of God, by any other name.

However, I have arrived at a place where it is *insufficient* to simply affirm, "I've got Jesus." Moreover, with the multiplicity of characters out there that are known by the same name, it may no longer be sufficient enough for me to only ask *which* Jesus I've got? Instead, the more telling question for me is which Jesus has got me? Which one grabs hold of me?

Which account of which story most authentically resounds most deeply where, for me, the "heart" of Christianity beats? As Borg once put it in one of his classic writings, "What is the animating source or driving force of Christianity, without which it would cease to exist?" [The Heart of Christianity, p2]

Here's just one example, with an observation. It is the familiar Parable of the Good Samaritan.\* [translation follow at the end of the Commentary.]

Scholars generally regard this parable as being as close to the original words of the historical Jesus as you can get; while the setting for the telling of the parable, along with the follow up Q&A session is clearly the work of Luke's early community of believers sharing their own findings to the question everyone in every age ends up asking. What can I do, and how can I be sure I've done enough, to truly live? Love God, and your neighbor as yourself is the correct formulaic belief. Strange enough, there is less curiosity about who the first object of my affection ought to be, and more about who one might get stuck with as a neighbor.

There's way too much to delve into what is to be found in the story itself, but a few highlights here may suffice to make a point. The institutionalized religion with its

ecclesiastical hierarchy has conformity to observe; hence the rigid response to the plight of the one cast off and left for dead along the path from the temple of holiness to nowhere. Without understanding those limitations, it is subsequently the outcast whose heart is wrenched into action; with unfettered compassion, reckless generosity, self-subjugation to an absolute stranger, and the fool hearty faith that another (the innkeeper) will be as selfless as the Samaritan. The parable is presumably told to answer the question who is one's neighbor. But the original (back story) question has to do with who has discovered the key to living fully.

I recently observed one of those presidential candidate debates on TV, where a question was posed to a Texas congressman who is also a non-practicing physician. By his own admission, however, he made the disclaimer he hadn't practiced medicine for years. After stating his qualified position against government mandates in general, and health care in particular, he was given the hypothetical question what should be done with a young man without health insurance who falls critically ill and needs extensive, costly life-saving medical attention to survive.

When pressed whether the congressman/physician thought the man should be left to fend for himself, over some voices in the audience shouting "Yes!," the candidate expressed his view that "churches, friends and neighbors should step up" like they used to do. It was one of those moments when I wished I'd been standing in the

moderator's shoes, with what to me was the most obvious comeback line, "And who is his neighbor?" For, it's the kind of question that not only asks which Jesus have you got, but which Jesus has got you?

Yesterday, my spouse and I spent a couple hours delivering empty grocery bags to the door steps of seventy of our neighbors, as part of our community's Annual Volunteer Day, and on behalf of the county Food Bank. Next Saturday, we'll pick up whatever food staples have been generously placed in the bags and left by the mailboxes up and down our street. The donated food will go to complete strangers, since I suspect no neighbor of mine that lives on our block has an empty kitchen cupboard. But we all know the need is abundantly out there.

As we made our way up one side of the street, we noticed two women making their way down the other side. With Bibles and pamphlets in hand were ringing our neighbors doorbells. Something told me they were Christians; and probably Christians of a different kind. I guessed they might be sharing their happy news they've got Jesus, and so could you.

At this point along the way, I'm just hoping Jesus has got me instead.

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The Good Samaritan, Vincent van Gogh, 1890

## The Parable of the Good Samaritan [Luke 10:25-37]

Note: What follows is the Jesus Seminar scholar's color coding as to the likelihood the historical Jesus uttered these words: "Yep, quite likely Jesus" – "Possibly, sure sounds like him" – "Probably subsequently attributed to Jesus in light of the early believers experience" – and, Nope / most likely a later theological development in the gospel tradition.

On one occasion, a legal expert stood up to put him to the test with a question: "Teacher, what do I have to do to inherit eternal life?"

He said to him, **"How do you read what is written in the Law?"**

And he answered, "You are to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your energy, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus said to him, **"You have given the correct answer; do this and you will have life."**

But with a view of justifying himself, he said to Jesus, "But who is my neighbor?"

Jesus replied, **"There was a man going from Jerusalem to down to Jericho when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him, beat him up, and went off leaving him half dead. Now by coincidence a priest was going down that road; when he caught sight of him, he went out of his way to avoid him. In the same way, when a Levite came to the place, he took one look at him and crossed the road to avoid him. But this Samaritan who was travelling that way came to where he as and was moved to pity at the sight of him. He went up to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring olive and wine on them. He hoisted him onto his own animal, brought him to an inn, and looked after him. The next day he took out two silver coins, which he gave to the innkeeper, and said, "Look after him, and on my way back I'll reimburse you for any extra expense you have had. Which of these three, in your opinion, acted like a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"**

He said, "The one who showed him compassion."

Jesus said to him, **"Then go and do the same yourself."**