

WHY I AM A CHRISTIAN - Part five - Teachings #'s 1224 & 1226

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WHY I BELIEVE JESUS CHRIST IS THE PROMISED MESSIAH, GOD THE SON

I received a bulk email recently from **Gamze Bayrak** in Istanbul, Turkey. It was, in many ways, a very gracious plea for peace and religious tolerance among three principle groups - **Muslims, Jews,** and **Christians**. This gentleman is a Muslim. And his plea for peace and tolerance is timely and, properly interpreted, necessary in these strife torn days.

The disturbing part of the letter came, not from the plea for tolerance itself, so much as the faulty **reasons** for the plea. Again, the goal of tolerance is worthy enough. The stated **reasons** are faulty and destructive to the cause of genuine truth. Let me quote from the email to show what I mean:

“Christian, Muslim and Jewish belief have many things in common. All true adherents of these three great religions believe (and then he makes his list of common beliefs) that God has created the entire universe out of nothing and that He dominates all that exists with His omnipotence....that God has created man and living things in a miraculous way and that man possesses a soul granted him by God....that besides Jesus, Moses or Muhammad, God sent many prophets such as Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Joseph throughout history, and they love all these prophets....”

The list went on, but I didn't need to read any more of it. I knew instantly that a line had been crossed. Once you lump Jesus in with Moses or Muhammad you prove, not only that you don't **endorse** the Christian faith, but you don't even **understand** the Christian faith.

Today's topic is ***Why I believe Jesus Christ is the promised Messiah, the God the Son***. Let's be clear right off the bat. If your goal is furthering **ecumenism** in this religiously pluralistic society, you won't get there by saying Jesus Christ is **either** the Messiah (because that will alienate you from the **Jews**) **or** God the Son (because that will certainly alienate you from the Muslims **and** Jews).

In other words, you can't be a Christian at all without separating yourself (and I mean separating yourself **doctrinally**, not by **discrimination** or **persecution**) from the other two dominant monotheistic religions of the world. There is simply no way to doctrinally **bridge** the huge gap between these three faiths without turning truth itself into something virtually meaningless. For example, how can you explain the words of **Rabbi Pinchas Lapide** in his book, **“The Resurrection of Jesus - A Jewish Perspective,”** when he says that it's true enough to say Jesus rose bodily from the grave, but only if you're a **Gentile**?

What kind of meaningless double-talk is this? The Apostle Paul said either He rose from the dead or He didn't. Or as we said in our very first study in this series, relative truth is empty truth. If something is true, it must be true for everyone, everywhere, all the time.

The New Testament gives clear indication that this issue of the identity of Jesus Christ is of utmost importance. Christians believe many things, but nothing is more important than this truth - ***Jesus Christ is God incarnate. He is not just a prophet. He is God the Son, the second member of the eternal Trinity.***

Now we come to a very important text: **Matthew 16:13-18** - ***“Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” [14] And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” [15] He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” [16] Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” [17] And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. [18] And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”***

Jesus had already performed miracles and done a great deal of preaching and teaching when He asked His closest followers this question: ***“What's the word out on the street? Who do people say I am?”***

“Well,” the disciples replied, “some say you're John the Baptist, some say you're Elijah, and some say you're Jeremiah.

But one of the *prophets* seems to be the common consensus.”

Clearly looking for *another* answer, Jesus presses His point again: *“Well, who do you say I am?”* And He presses deeper because this is the ultimate question for every seeker of truth. This is the central issue of faith for every person on earth. This is the question Jesus directs to every person of every age. It’s the question He asks you and me. In fact, the Apostle Paul says it’s the determining question for any who would find God through the power of the Holy Spirit: **1 Corinthians 12:3b** - **“Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says “Jesus is accursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except in the Holy Spirit.”**

Of course, Paul didn’t mean that no one could say those *words*, **“Jesus is Lord,”** unless he was a sincere Christian. Probably you could teach a parrot to repeat those words. But he meant that this is the *badge* - the identifying *spiritual birthmark* of a genuine work of the Holy Spirit in the heart. You can’t get there without this confession of Jesus as the Divine Lord - God the Son.

And so Jesus awaits the answer from His disciples, and Peter speaks up with these wonderful words: **Matthew 16:16** - **“Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”**

Two great truths are bound up in Peter’s brief response: Jesus is the *Old Testament promised Messiah* (that’s the meaning of the word “Christ”), and Jesus is the *divine Son of God*. And Jesus doesn’t *rebuke* Peter. He doesn’t say, **“Wait a minute Peter. I’m glad you think so highly of me, but let’s not get carried away!”** By the way, that *is* exactly what a *good teacher* would say if someone said he was God. A *good teacher* would insist on basic honesty. But Jesus’ words ring with *endorsement* to everything Peter said: **Matthew 16:17-18** - **“And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. [18] And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”**

These words have nothing whatsoever to do with Jesus making Peter the first pope. Jesus *wasn’t* saying He would build His church on *Peter*. But He *was* saying His church would be built around Peter’s *confession*.

In other words, this truth - this true proclamation of who Jesus Christ was - both the *promised Messiah* and *God the Son* - is absolutely *non-negotiable* in Jesus’ mind. If you take this truth away, you take away the very foundation of the Church. Everything hinges on this great, truth-centered confession.

That’s what we’re going to be studying for the next two Sundays. I want to deal with why *I* believe Jesus is the Messiah, and why *I* believe He is the Son of God. I think you will see that those two ideas lie so closely together you really *can’t* treat them as two separate subjects. So bear with me through some periods of overlap as we try to *treat* these as two separate topics just for simplicity of outline sake.

1) **I BELIEVE JESUS IS THE PROMISED MESSIAH BECAUSE HE ALONE FULFILLS THE REQUIREMENTS OF OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECY**

There is staggering textual evidence pointing to Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah in the Scriptures. *John Barton Payne* says there are **574 verses** in the Old Testament referring to the Messiah and messianic times. *John Phillips* cites the 25 prophecies which deal exclusively with just the **betrayal, trial, death, burial and resurrection** of the Messiah and calculates that the odds of all of those being fulfilled in any one person are **1 in 33,554,438**. But they *are* all fulfilled in Christ. That’s the simple evidence of history and the biblical text.

Let’s look very quickly at just two of these areas of prophetic fulfillment - the Messiah’s *birth* and the Messiah’s *death*:

- a) **Prophetic fulfillment in the birth of the Messiah** - The text we’ll look at is **Micah 5:2** - **“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.”**

Micah wrote those words **700 years before Christ’s birth**. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit he predicts four very important things about the coming Messiah:

- i) **The Messiah’s birthplace was to be uniquely connected with the dynasty of David and its**

eternal kingdom. Almost everyone would recognize the connection of the birthplace of the Messiah with the city virtually linked with the person of King David. It's even called "**Bethlehem, the city of David.**"

In fact, that's what the angel said at the birth of Jesus - **Luke 2:10-11** - "**And the angel said to them, 'Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. [11] For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.'**"

- ii) **Micah predicted the humble beginnings and surroundings connected with the birth of the Messiah.** Bethlehem was considered to be "**too little to be among the clans of Judah...**" This fits in exactly with the way in which God brought His Messiah into the world through the "backdoor" of history.
- iii) **The Messianic King would be God's appointed ruler over Israel.** He would be uniquely appointed **by God Himself** as the leader over God's chosen people. This kingdom would not be the result of **human election** or **political appointment**. This would be a supernatural kingdom right from the start.
- iv) **Micah stated clearly that, while the Messiah's going forth into ministry began in Bethlehem, His origin was from eternity.** As regards to his **human origin** he is to be born in Bethlehem. But as to His **divine origin**, He is said to be "**whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.**"

This ties in perfectly with what another prophet, **Isaiah**, said regarding the coming of the Messiah into this world: **Isaiah 9:6** - "**For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.**"

Two things happen at once with the birth of Jesus, the Messiah: a child is **born**, and a son is **given**. He is both born a "**child**" and given as "**Mighty God.**"

- b) **Prophetic fulfillment in the death of the Messiah** - The text here is **Isaiah 52:13-53:12**. Consider just these brief points as a quick prophetic summary:
 - i) The prophet Isaiah, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, predicted the Servant of the Lord would ultimately be **highly exalted (52:13)**, as well as **honored by the Gentiles (52:15)**, but only after his own time of **dreadful personal suffering (52:14)**.
 - ii) The prophet Isaiah saw Israel would utterly reject the Servant of the Lord in both his **life (53:1-3)** as well as in his **death (53:7-9)**. They would miss the whole plan of **redemption** because they would assume he was dying for his **own** sins, rather than for the sins of the **nation**.
 - iii) Finally, the prophet Isaiah predicted that eventually, in the future, because of the Servant's completed work of redemption, God would cause him to be exalted (**53:10**), believers would be justified (**53:11**), and the Servant Himself would be raised to life and honored (**Isaiah 53:10, 12**).

Now, because this is such a pivotal text, our Jewish friends simply must find another interpretation for who this Servant of the Lord is. Almost all devout Jews teach the suffering servant is the nation **Israel**, not some select individual, anointed by God.

But this simply won't work, for the following reasons:

- i) **First, the Servant is declared to be pure and holy, bearing other's sins, not committing his own (Isaiah 52:13, 53:5-6,9).** Find me a devout Jew who would claim for himself or herself such holiness. If this is a description of Israel, why the need for a national day of atonement? What are we to make of Isaiah's (as well as a host of other divinely appointed prophets) indictment against Israel's stubbornness and rebellion against God (**Isaiah 1**)? And what are we to do with Isaiah's

confession of his own sinfulness before the Lord (**Isaiah 6:5-7**)?

- ii) Second, the Servant is said to suffer totally without any **retaliation** for the injustice received (**Isaiah 53:7**). Truly, Israel **has** suffered much as a nation, but who would say she has **never** retaliated for a wrong suffered?
- iii) Finally, the Servant is said to suffer **redemptively** on behalf of **others**, not for **himself** (**Isaiah 52:14-15, 53:4-6**). The prophet Isaiah, and Israel, and everyone else who has ever lived, faces the consequence and punishment for their **own** wickedness. This is why the Jewish prayer books all make continual confession of personal sin. This suffering Servant in Isaiah's prophecy suffered only for the sins of others, to **atone** for their guilt. In contrast, when Jesus described His death, He told His disciples "This is my body, broken **for you**."

2) **I BELIEVE JESUS CHRIST IS THE PROMISED MESSIAH BECAUSE OF HIS OWN CLAIMS TO HAVE FULFILLED THESE OLD TESTAMENT PROPHETIC SCRIPTURES**

If you want to say Jesus was delusional you may, but there is simply no **denying** that He at least **claimed** to be the fulfillment of these messianic prophecies. And He didn't just mention this once or twice in passing. He **pressed** this point over and over again. It was of great importance to Jesus:

Luke 24:25-27 - "And he said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! [26] Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" [27] And beginning *with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.*"

Luke 24:44-48 - "Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, *that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.*" [45] Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, [46] and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, [47] and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. [48] You are witnesses of these things."

Passages like these are very important. If Jesus **isn't** the promised Messiah, then He's a liar or a fool. But He can't be a great moral teacher **or** a genuine prophet, as most other religions state, because a great moral teacher doesn't lie, and a great prophet isn't mistaken and delusional.

3) **I BELIEVE JESUS CHRIST IS THE PROMISED MESSIAH BECAUSE OF THE TESTIMONY AND TRANSFORMATION OF THE FIRST BELIEVERS**

Virtually **all** of the first followers of Jesus were **Jews** - thousands of them. Many came out of the strict religious structures of the Pharisees and the growing extra-biblical tradition of the Talmud. There is so much we could look at here. Let me just quickly give a few examples:

- a) **Look at the account of the conversion of the Apostle Paul.** Paul puts it all so clearly in his own words before King Agrippa. Look at the way he describes his orthodox, strict, Jewish background:

Acts 26:2-5 - "I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, I am going to make my defense today against all the accusations of the Jews, [3] especially because you are familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews. Therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently. [4] "My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and in Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews. [5] They have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee."

But there is much more. Paul wasn't intellectually soft minded toward Jesus of Nazareth. There was nothing about him that would have made him **gullible** toward the claims of Jesus as the promised Messiah:

Acts 26:9-11 - "I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. [10] And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. [11] And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities."

Paul is setting the stage. No one *hated* Jesus, and no one *doubted* Jesus more than Paul. What could possibly change the fundamental belief structure of such a passionate Jew? Please read these next words carefully. They are Paul's words *in court*. This is his speech *under oath*. They are his *studied, careful analysis* of what had happened in his own life. These words could have cost Paul his life. He didn't just throw them out casually. I know this is a longer portion of text than is usually read, but it deserves our best attention:

Acts 26:12-23 - "In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. [13] At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me. [14] And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' [15] And I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. [16] But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, [17] delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles— to whom I am sending you [18] to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.' [19] "Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, [20] but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance. [21] For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. [22] To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: [23] that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles."

Paul is just the most obvious example of what happened to tens of thousands of Jews. They became convinced that Jesus Christ was the Messiah. They died for their faith in Jesus the Christ. *Hypocrites don't become martyrs any more than false Messiah's rise from the dead.* These Jews had been genuinely transformed by the promised Messiah, Jesus the Christ.

b) **Look at the transformation in the key worship and social structures of these first followers of Jesus.** Things changed instantly:

i) These Jewish followers of the Messiah *never endorsed another animal sacrifice for sin* after they came to know Jesus the Christ.

Once they understood what all the Jewish prophets had been saying in the Old Testament - once they came to understand the meaning of Isaiah's great prophecy in Isaiah 53 - they realized that since Christ's death on the cross all other sacrifices were redundant at best and blasphemous at worst. These Jewish believers knew what the Messiah meant when He bowed His head on the cross and said *"It is finished."*

Remember, this is no small change when we remember that to refuse to offer the prescribed Mosaic sacrifice for sin was punishable by death. These people needed to be *soundly convinced of who Jesus really was and the genuineness of His atoning death on the cross in fulfillment of the Old Testament Jewish prophetic Scriptures.*

ii) These Jewish believers no longer felt obligated to *keep the Mosaic law in its entirety* by keeping

themselves separated exclusively from uncircumcised Gentiles.

Jews and Gentiles were now uniquely one through the sacrifice of Jesus the Christ on the cross - **Ephesians 2:13-15** - **“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. [14] For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility [15] by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace....”**

- iii) Since the Resurrection of Jesus, the Messiah, these Jewish believers became a distinctly ***Trinitarian worshiping community***. Though certainly the concept of the Trinity is alluded to in the Old Testament, these first Christians passionately worshiped the one God as expressed in the relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Much more could be said here, but this much makes the point: ***These changes were substantial changes***. Jews followed the regulations and institutions of the Old Covenant because **God** had told them to do so. To forsake these things was punishable by death and would certainly bring judgement after death. Only Jews who were convinced that **God Himself** was at work in His promised Messiah would even dare change their ways.

These were changes that brought persecution, suffering, imprisonment, and death. They certainly brought ostracization for Jewish believers from their families and friends. ***But they made these changes in the thousands!*** Only a living, ruling, personal, divine Messiah accounts for these transformed lives. They had been ***inwardly changed***.

Here's the reason these Jews were coming to the promised Messiah, the Son of God: The words of the Jewish prophet Isaiah were already starting to find their first glimmerings of fulfillment - ***“As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, As He will bear their iniquities....and the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in His hand.”***

“So who do men say that I am?”, Jesus asked. What matter most to Jesus is human perception of His identity. “You’re the Christ,” says Peter, “the Son of the living God.” And Jesus confirms. “That’s what My church is all about. ***Knowing*** this. ***Living*** this. ***Proclaiming*** this. Nothing is more important.”