

“The Debate Concerning Jesus”

John 7:25-52

September 10, 2000

Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

Text Comment

- v.26 The thought seems to be that the folk who live in Jerusalem know of the plot against Jesus, but they are surprised that, though Jesus is teaching so boldly, no one has taken any action against him. J.B. Phillips renders their statement, “It’s amazing – he talks quite openly and they haven’t a word to say to him.” They began to wonder whether that meant that the leaders had concluded that Jesus really was the Messiah.
- v.27 The thought is not that the OT doesn’t say something about where the Messiah is from. The people know that he was to be born in Bethlehem as we will read later in v. 42. Apparently, the reference is to a popularly held idea, attested in some earlier literature, that the Messiah would remain unrecognized *until the moment he appeared in his power to deliver the people*. That is, there would be none of this “Perhaps he is, perhaps he isn’t” that we have here about Jesus. Of course, John gives their statement an ironic twist by leaving it as it is. They think they know about the Lord’s “origins” but they are completely ignorant of the most important facts. They think he came from Nazareth. They do not know of his birth in Bethlehem, much less his coming from heaven!
- v.29 Read the Lord’s first words as irony. “So you know me and my origin!” No they don’t. They don’t know where he came from really, or who sent him. The Jews, of course, prided themselves on being the people who really knew the living God. But Jesus says that they do not know God and so, naturally, they don’t know or recognize the one who came from God.
- v.30 The crowd, or some in the crowd, tried to seize Jesus, in a spontaneous effort to do immediately what the leadership had been plotting to do for some time. But, in some way, they were prevented from doing so. Perhaps because there were so many in the crowd who responded favorably to Jesus.
- v.31 With what seriousness or sincerity these people believed we are not told. We have already encountered in John a “sort-of” faith in Jesus that amounted to nothing much except temporary enthusiasm. Surely the reason these folk give for believing in Jesus is a poor one.
- v.32 The Pharisees were closer to the people. The chief priests were wealthy Sadducees. Ordinarily the two groups did not get on very well, but a common enemy can make for strange bedfellows. [Carson, 319] The temple guards were a kind of police force under the command of the Sanhedrin. But the suspense will build because John does not tell us right away what became of this mission to arrest Jesus.

- v.34 “Where I go you cannot come,” is a warning that many of these people would die in their sins and would not join him in heaven, as a comparison with 8:21 indicates.
- v.36 Again the irony, for the gospel will go to the Greeks however little the people now speaking understood any of that. As often in the Gospel of John, the people’s misunderstanding actually conveys the truth.
- v.39 We are told later more explicitly that the Spirit could not come until after the Lord’s departure, a departure he had just mentioned in the previous verses. On each day of the Feast of Tabernacles there was a water pouring rite. The priest would draw water from the Pool of Siloam in a golden pitcher and bring it, in procession, to the temple with the sounding of the trumpet. There the water was poured into a bowl beside the altar from which a tube took it to the base of the altar. It was an act of thanksgiving for the Lord providing water for his people in the wilderness and up to the present time. The Talmud reads: “Why is the name of it called, The drawing out of water? Because of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, according to what is said: ‘With joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation.’” [That last a citation of Isaiah 12:3] So the Lord chose his occasion well for a remark about living water and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

When a person comes to Christ and drinks living water, he not only slakes his own thirst, but he becomes a source of that living water to others. They will indeed become a means of taking Christ’s salvation to the Greeks. We are to be like the Sea of Galilee, drinking in and pouring out, not like the Dead Sea that drinks in but never pours out and becomes useless water as a result. That is, of course, the great significance of Pentecost. The Spirit was given to equip us to be a means of God’s grace to the world.

- v.42 We note the irony again as John lets the statement stand. His readers, of course, know full well that Jesus was born in Bethlehem.
- v.45 The NIV’s “Finally” is the word “therefore.” The guards returned without making an arrest *because of* the extreme division of the people. The Jews wanted an arrest, not a riot.
- v.46 They could have mentioned the division of opinion within the crowd but did not, instead explaining how impressive the Lord’s speaking was. They themselves had been impressed.
- v.49 For not being faithful to the law, which the Pharisees thought they were and Jesus was not!
- v.51 Nicodemus speaks up but cautiously. He does not bear witness to Jesus but he speaks in a way that helps Jesus.
- v.52 They are angry, they’ve lost their prey, Jesus has made them look small before the people and they are in no mood to be talked back to.

Now we have before us this morning the variety of responses that people make to Jesus Christ and the division that he produces among people. There is a remarkable timelessness to this passage. It portrays people in Jesus' day responding to him in exactly the way in which people have responded to him ever since and do still today.

There are folk who think him mad for the claims that he is making. Some said that to his face, as we read last week in v. 20. The same thought may well have been in the minds of those who tried to seize him as we read in v. 30 and again in v. 44. Here was an unstable man making wild and obviously ridiculous claims about himself. It is not, of course, unknown for people to make such claims and for us to conclude that they are mad. Mental hospitals have within their walls people who claim to be Jesus Christ, or the Son of God, or some other august personage. They thought such must be the case here.

But, then there were others who were enamored of Jesus and of his teaching. They were quite willing to believe that he was a prophet sent from God, they were even open to the idea that he was the Messiah. His miracles had impressed them and no wonder. His teaching was marked by an authority that they had never encountered before. Some even "believed in him" while others wanted him dead. They had little understanding of who he was, perhaps at the last they will have little sympathy for what he came to do, but at this point, at any rate, they are found on his side.

And, then, there is another group. In a most typical fashion, it is an elite group, a group of leaders, of opinion-shapers, of influential men. Their response is not pity, as if Jesus were mad, and it is not enthusiasm, as if this remarkable man had something wonderful to give the world. It is hatred, enmity, loathing. We saw before that lying behind and beneath their hatred is their jealousy of Jesus and his popularity and the way in which the crowds seemed, by their enthusiasm, to suggest that the scribes and Pharisees were small men in comparison. But they, of course, put it in terms of Jesus' false teaching, his heresy, his deceit, as we hear them in v. 47. He was a charlatan, a false prophet, an imposter preying on the ignorant masses. We have plenty of people like this in our society today, folk like Richard Dawkins who liken Jesus Christ to small pox.

I don't know if you thought of it while we were reading the text, but it is, perhaps more than any other text in the Bible, an illustration of the famous argument that goes by the Latin name "aut Deus aut malus homo." Jesus Christ is either God or a bad man. Take your pick. But, you have no other alternative. C.S. Lewis is famous for the modern restatement of this ancient argument, which was given first in a modern form by G.K. Chesterton in his great work, *The Everlasting Man*, and was taken over by Lewis from that book.

It came in the third of his famous BBC radio broadcasts during World War II, the talks that eventually became his book, *The Case for Christianity*, which itself was later incorporated in his justly famous classic, *Mere Christianity*.

"There suddenly turns up a man who goes about talking as if He was God. He claims to forgive sins. He says He has always existed. He says He is coming to judge the world at the end of time. Now let us get this clear... I'm trying here to prevent anyone from saying the really silly thing that people often say about Him: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a

great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That's the one thing we mustn't say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said wouldn't be a great moral teacher. He'd either be a lunatic – on the level with the man who says he's a poached egg – or else he'd be the Devil of Hell.

“You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call Him Lord and God. But don't let us come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great moral teacher. He hasn't left that open to us. He didn't intend to.”

Our text illustrates that argument, “either God or an evil man,” in two separate ways.

First, it reports the people basically making the same argument themselves. You can hear them make it. Some think he is insane to say the things that he does. Some think him a prophet sent from God or even more. And some think him an imposter, milking a credulous but uneducated people for all they're worth. Those are the three responses, the three conclusions, we find in this account of the people's consideration of Jesus and his claims.

But, in a second way, this incident confirms the force of that argument in that no one here or later on finds another way to take Jesus of Nazareth. No one ends up at the conclusion of the gospel story believing that Jesus was simply a great moral teacher. Some believed in him. Some conspired to kill him. And, perhaps there were a number of those who pitied him but who wouldn't, without prodding, lend their support to his execution. They regretted that he was so misguided.

As Lewis noted in another place, “[Jesus] was never regarded as a mere moral teacher. He did not produce that effect on any of the people who actually met him. He produced mainly three effects: hatred – terror – adoration. There was no trace of people expressing mild approval.”

There is the argument then. Making the claims that Jesus did make, we must either accept that he was who he said he was and believe in him as the Son of God sent from heaven, or we must admit that he was either an imposter, a fraud, or that he was in some way out of his mind.

At the end of the heady days of Protestant liberalism, at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, there were scholars who were prepared to face these facts. You remember that Protestant liberalism was born as a movement that proposed to take Jesus as simply a great moral teacher, who went about teaching the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. If you start, as many of these men did, from the premise that the supernatural is unreal and that miracles do not happen, *but, at the same time, you have some affection for Jesus and loyalty to his influence in the world*, you are left with precious little else to say but that he was a great moral teacher. But that sappy and sentimental solution to the problem posed by Jesus Christ did not last a generation. The facts were against it in the most obvious way. The facts were against it in just the way Lewis argued the facts would always be against someone who wanted to take Jesus in a way no one ever took him in his own time. The central message of the gospel and of Christianity was not Jesus' teaching, it was Jesus himself, who he is and what he came to do. That is

precisely what Jesus himself says here. That fact couldn't be evaded for long. [S. Neill, *The Interpretation of the NT: 1861-1961*, 191] You must accept or reject the story as it is told in the Gospels. The things Jesus says are very different from what any other teacher has said. Others say, "This is the truth about the Universe. This is the way you ought to go." But he says, "I am the truth, and the way, and the Life, no one can reach absolute reality except through me."

Albert Schweitzer, the famous missionary doctor to Africa was also no mean NT scholar. He saw right through the "Jesus as a moral teacher" ploy. And in his famous work on Jesus he concluded that Jesus was nuts. Not crazy in the straight-jacket sense of the word, not demented. Just thoroughly and profoundly confused and utterly mistaken. He thought he was the one appointed to bring in the kingdom of God. He thought his death would bring in the kingdom. But, he was mistaken, and, so Schweitzer said, he realized as he hung on the cross that he had, in fact, made and given his life to a gigantic mistake. There are gigantic problems with Schweitzer's proposal, of course, which is why it did not last his own lifetime. Not least it does not begin to explain what must first be explained, viz. in the face of Jesus' death, when he had been apparently discredited and his followers disillusioned, what was it that made his disciples then so sure *that the kingdom of God had come* and that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God.

But that does not mean that men have given up on the identification of the Lord Jesus as a great moral teacher. Oh, no, it is as commonly thought today as ever. But how? In this way. Now it is argued that the claims that Jesus made for himself in the gospels he never made. They were put into his mouth later by Christian writers. The Jesus presented to us in the four Gospels never existed except later in the mind of the church. He is a creation of the church's imagination. Nothing like the conversation reported here in John 7 ever took place. The silliness of the so-called Jesus project, a group of radical unbelievers, only a few of whom could legitimately be described as NT scholars, is an extreme form of this viewpoint. That was a claim easier to make in the 19th century when many scholars believed that the Gospels had been written more than a hundred years after the events they purported to describe. But no one thinks that anymore. There are even liberal scholars who argue that the entire NT, including all four gospels, was written *before* the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The opinion that the Gospels were not written by eyewitnesses of Jesus' own ministry is now much more difficult to maintain. Still, many claim today that the Jesus of the Gospels is a different person than the Jesus who really lived.

This is the claim, for example, of A.N. Wilson, the British journalist and author who wrote a biography of C.S. Lewis a few years back. Wilson had the audacity to claim that it was studying Lewis and his arguments for Christianity that convinced him *not* to be a Christian. That is mostly bombast, of course. Wilson didn't want to become a Christian as his books make clear enough. But still he argues that Lewis' argument about Christ is fallacious because he ignored this fatal flaw, viz. that the Jesus who is presented to us in the gospels is made up, not a real historical figure. You can't say that a man who claimed the sort of things that Jesus claimed – to be the Son of God and so on – must be God or an evil man because we don't know, indeed, we have great reason to doubt that the real Jesus ever claimed to be the Son of God.

I read a riposte to that argument by Wilson by another scholar who pointed out that Lewis was, in his day, probably more expert in the evaluation of literature than any other man alive. And, of course, Lewis didn't ignore the argument that A.N. Wilson makes, he rejected it as unsupported

by the evidence. Lewis pointed out that the view of the gospels taken by much of liberal scholarship, that they were a patchwork of later legendary accretions to a small original historical core, was highly unbelievable. Rather, Lewis argued, the gospels are about as far away from legends as one can get, they aren't written like legends are written, they do not have the marks of legendary additions, there is nothing like them in ancient legendary literature or ancient literature as a whole, and so on. As Lewis once wrote, "Now, as a literary historian, I am perfectly convinced that whatever else the Gospels are they are not legends. I have read a great deal of legend and I am quite clear that they are not the same sort of thing." [*God in the Dock*, 158]

I am quite content to let the unbelieving mind rest its entire case against the deity and Saviorhood of Jesus Christ on the notion that the Jesus we encounter in the Gospels is not the one who really lived but is another who was invented by people twenty or thirty years later. There is a broken reed if ever there was one! It reminds me of Mark Twain's wry comment about the *Iliad* in the days when scholars thought they could detect a variety of sources and different authors behind the finished work – an effort completely abandoned eventually, by the way, a failure biblical scholarship should have learned from – "The *Iliad*," Twain remarked, "was written either by Homer or by another man with the same name." Or, to put it in the terms of the argument, now you have to either say that Jesus was the Son of God or say that Jesus was a fraud or that the New Testament is a fraud.

But it is very hard to think the NT a fraud. Hardly anyone does so. They just shut their ears to it and try not to face the implications of its message about Jesus Christ, about its claim that those who wrote it knew him personally and were eyewitnesses of his deeds. Did the author of the sermon on the mount lie to us about Jesus Christ? Did those who gave us the account of the Lord's resurrection know that their words were not true? The idea is so preposterous that virtually no one in history has ever held it. But if they will not hold it, what then?

I do not say that this argument or any other arguments will persuade an unbeliever to fall at the Lord's feet and cry out "What must I do to be saved?" The Lord's miracles themselves did not have that effect. Such is the power of unbelief. As the Lord has already told us in John's Gospel, one must be born again and no one comes to him unless the Father in heaven draws him."

But, I say to you, Christian people, there are more than enough reasons to be sure that Jesus is the Son of God and that you are right to lay the outcome of your life and your destiny in his all-powerful and all-loving hands. I tell you at the great day, men will be without excuse, and what will they say then when they have their words read back to them, "You mean, he has deceived you also?"

Let us, you and I, live in the confidence of this faith in the Son of God. You have no rational ground for going back on the arguments that convinced you that Jesus was Lord and Savior of the world. But, sometimes the irrational deadweight of our skeptical sinful nature and the constant pressure of the spirit of this age can take away our lively feeling of the truth. But think again. It is the truth. Of course it is. And even the unbeliever's response to it proves it to be the truth once again.