

Wednesday, February 22, 2006

***Why Christianity Seems Silly to Intelligent People #3 of 5:***

## **Jesus: Messiah ... or Liar?**

Teaching Pastor Doug Brendel

Let me suggest a good way to get attention at a cocktail party.  
You get with a group of people and wait for a lull in the conversation,  
and then you say,  
“Hey, let me ask you a question:  
How do you feel about Jesus?”

I guarantee, you’ll be the center of attention.  
I would expect a huge, empty crater to form around you pretty quickly — a great big  
void where no one dares to tread.  
People are uncomfortable with the subject of Jesus Christ.

It’s not the same if you’re just talking about God.  
People are a lot more OK, for some reason, talking about God than they are about  
Jesus.

But Jesus? Let’s not talk about Jesus.  
It makes people uncomfortable.  
If you’re not watching a high school production of “Jesus Christ Superstar”  
or listening to a Christmas concert where they sing Handel’s “Messiah,”  
then the subject of Jesus is kind of — disquieting, unsettling, troubling.

Why is this?  
Well, maybe we can get to the bottom of this question today.  
I think it might be possible, if you’re feeling at all uneasy about the subject of Jesus  
Christ right now,  
you could actually feel OK about the subject in a few minutes.  
Let’s just see, anyway.

One thing we know for sure is, we’re sort of “stuck with” Jesus.  
We know for an absolute fact that he existed in history.  
In our study a couple sessions ago, we saw how rock-solid the historical documents are  
that make up the Bible —  
the archeologists confirm them, the history scholars confirm them.  
(If you weren’t with us for that study, and you have doubts about the historical  
authenticity of the Scriptures, I would invite you to check out that talk — it was  
the first one in this series.)

Anyway, I’m sort of stuck with Jesus.  
He actually existed — he’s not a legend like Paul Bunyan or Hercules or Harry Potter.  
There’s no real question about his identity.

This is the guy who was actually born about 2,000 years ago  
 and grew up in Palestine  
 and taught a bunch of amazing stuff that's recorded in reliable historical documents in  
 the Bible,  
 and made the *outrageous* claim that he was actually God in human form —  
 the phrases the Bible uses are “the Son of God” and “Messiah.”  
 “Messiah” translates “anointed one” —  
 in today's English, we would probably define this phrase as “the one who was  
 designated for the job”;  
 and in this case the job that Jesus was designated for was to save our lives.

This is the actual person named Jesus who was put on trial for claiming to be the  
 Messiah, the Son of God, sent to save our lives.

This is the actual person named Jesus who was sentenced to death by crucifixion,  
 and who, according to reliable historical records, made the *outrageous* claim that he  
 was doing it because this would let anybody in the world get forgiven for their  
 sins if they wanted,  
 and he was doing it just because he loved them so much.

This is the actual person named Jesus who then came back to life,  
 and proceeded to interact for days and days with dozens of witnesses,  
 and in spite of how people tried to keep the news out of the papers at the time,  
 and in spite of how people have tried to come up with different explanations down  
 through the centuries,  
 there's still no reliable alternative story available.  
 The historical truth has simply floated to the surface and stays there.

And this is the actual person named Jesus who finally, one day, gravitated up into  
 heaven —  
 and he's apparently still alive to this day, speaking to people in a spiritual way instead of  
 in the physical realm like he did during those years he was here on earth as a  
 man.

If his life story seems weird to you, there's a good reason for this:  
 it's the strangest story in history.  
 It's the most unusual biography of any person who ever lived.

\* \* \*

So — if Jesus Christ is a fact, then what's the big deal about him?  
 Why do so many people seem to care so much about him?  
 Why do I feel kind of strange about this idea that Jesus is actually alive today, speaking  
 to people on a kind of spiritual wavelength,  
 and that he actually loves each of us as individuals?

Well, I can't speak for you; I can't make you think something or believe something.  
 But I *can* tell you about my own experience....

I grew up singing “Jesus Loves Me.”  
 Do you know that song?  
*“Jesus loves me, this I know,  
 for the Bible tells me so.  
 Little ones to him belong;  
 they are weak, but he is strong.  
 Yes, Jesus loves me....”*

I grew up in a church in Indiana;  
 we had a concrete block basement  
 where we held our children’s church,  
 and there on the concrete wall was an oil portrait of Jesus.  
 He was looking up into heaven;  
 he had kind of a sheen on his face.  
 He had long glowing hair and a beard.  
 He was wearing a white and blue toga or something.  
 I didn’t know anybody who looked like that.  
 The Beatles hadn’t even arrived in America yet.

But that wasn’t the only Jesus in my life.  
 For example, there was the Jesus who gets mad.  
 He keeps track of your sins,  
 and he punishes you when you do wrong.  
 A pastor in Michigan, to his horror, overheard his little daughter one day singing,  
 “Jesus Claus is coming to town.”  
 But that’s exactly the Jesus many of us imagine.  
*“He’s making a list, checking it twice,  
 gonna find out who’s naughty or nice....”*  
 He’s scowling at us from heaven,  
 watching to see if we obey the rules or not,  
 and if we don’t, it goes in our *permanent record*.

Some of us grew up with Jesus hanging on a cross,  
 bloody and dying,  
 or dead.

On the other hand, some of us grew up hearing that we should have a “personal  
 relationship with Jesus.”  
 But this sounds like someone who’s alive and well, someone who lives in my  
 neighborhood or in my family.

Then some of us grew up hearing that we should be like Jesus.  
 What does this mean?  
 In the 70’s I went to a Christian college,  
 and they had a dress code,  
 and part of the dress code was:

guys couldn't wear a mustache, or a beard,  
 or have their hair over their ears.  
 But hanging on the wall was a portrait of Jesus  
 who looked strangely like the guys who were getting kicked out of school!  
 Were we supposed to *be* like Jesus but not *look* like Jesus? What's up with that?

Then there are the movies,  
 the films that various people have made of the life of Jesus,  
 and over and over again, they show us a Jesus who has this kind of other-worldly look  
 in his eyes,  
 kind of like Charles Manson or something.  
 But he always seems to be real pale in the face,  
 like, Didn't he walk everywhere, wasn't he outside all the time?  
 Wouldn't he have at least a little bit of a tan?  
 And in the movies, Jesus always seems to speak with a kind of disembodied monotone.  
 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" —  
 kind of like Don Pardo on Valium:  
 "Wonderful prizes indeed, Tom, let's see what our new champion has won..."

Some of us grew up with Jesus Christ as a cuss word.  
 Isn't it strange when you miss an easy putt on the golf course, you're never once  
 tempted to say, "Thomas Jefferson!"  
 You never see a plumber hit his thumb with a wrench and yell, "Mahatma Gandhi!"  
 No.  
 They talk about someone called Jesus Christ.

And then, what's up with the calendar thing?  
 Why is there a B.C., before Christ, and an A.D. — anno domini, which is Latin for "the  
 year of the Lord" — in other words, "After Christ"?

Well, from my own personal perspective, I can tell you that my own life has had a B.C.  
 and an A.D.  
 I grew up in a church,  
 in fact I grew up in a church that taught the Bible, that preached about Jesus,  
 and I went to a college that taught about Jesus,  
 in my professional life I worked for ministries that taught about Jesus.  
 But until I found out for myself what Jesus really said, and what Jesus really meant,  
 I didn't really know him.  
 I didn't really have a clue how he actually felt about me.  
 And I didn't really know how to relate to him,  
 because I didn't know what he really wanted.

I believed.  
 Just like so many people today who have grown up in one kind of church or another, I  
 believed Jesus really did die for my sins,  
 and then rose from the grave, conquering death,

and then went back to heaven to watch over me,  
 and I could pray and he would hear me,  
 and if I was a good enough person,  
 if I could avoid sinning,  
 or if I could do enough good deeds to make up for them,  
 then he would love me.  
 He would help me.  
 He would protect me.  
 Whatever.

But if I wasn't really a good enough person,  
 well, how could I expect him to love me, or take care of me?  
 And honestly, secretly, I wondered, What did it mean to be a good enough person?  
 When I was a kid, growing up in a very conservative church,  
 you weren't a good enough person if you went to the movies,  
 or if you were a woman and you wore pants,  
 or if you played a game with a deck of cards or with dice.  
 And then, as I became an adolescent,  
 with all the raging hormones and the urge to experiment,  
 I was like, Oh man, if I were only playing card games!  
 If that was my only sin, I'd practically be Billy Graham!

I felt so guilty, that little song, "Jesus Loves Me," seemed less and less like a sure thing.  
*"Jesus loves me, this I know,  
 for the Bible tells me so."*  
 No, just because the Bible tells me so *isn't good enough*.  
 If Jesus knows what I was doing last night, then he doesn't love me, no matter *what* the  
 Bible says!

*"Little ones to him belong..."*  
 See, I figured this was the problem.  
 This is a *children's* song,  
 and there's a reason for that!  
 Because Jesus *doesn't* love me!  
 In fact, Jesus is ... mad at me.

Our church while I was growing up had altar calls.  
 At the end of every service, you were invited to come down front to the stage area —  
 we called the stage the "platform," and we called the front of the stage the "altar" —  
 and you could kneel there and pray and ask Jesus to forgive you of your sins.

And I would go down to the altar, and I would pray,  
 and I would plead with Jesus to forgive me,  
 and I would promise not to be bad anymore —  
 "I'll live right, I promise, I'll never do it again" —  
 and I'd go away feeling clean and confident,

*Jesus loves me, this I know,*  
 and things would go great for a few days,  
 and then all of a sudden,  
 out of nowhere,  
*TEMPTATION.*  
 And boom — I'd give in.  
 And then *boom* — the guilt would come crashing in,  
 the *Tidal Wave of Shame!*

*"Jesus doesn't love me, this I know..."*  
 And the next Sunday I'd be down at that altar,  
 pleading with Jesus for forgiveness,  
 and promising never to be bad again.  
 Anything, anything, just to get Jesus to love me again.

As I grew into adulthood, it was the same thing.  
 The look of the process changed —  
 for one thing, I switched to a church that didn't do all those altar calls —  
 but inside, in my heart, in my head,  
 it was the same thing, over and over again:  
 I'm being good, Jesus loves me,  
 I do something bad, Jesus doesn't love me,  
 I pray, I ask him to forgive me,  
 I promise I won't do it again,  
 Jesus loves me.  
 If I'm not good, I can't expect Jesus to love me.

It was exhausting.  
 It was disheartening.  
 Because I could never be good enough for very long.  
 And I could never be sure that my "good" was really good enough for Jesus.  
 Even when I was good for a long time,  
 I had to keep working at it, didn't I?

I went through college this way.  
 I went through an entire marriage that way.  
 Bit by bit, I wore myself down.  
 I ground myself down, like a pencil point.  
 Feeling less and less of God's love.  
 Until finally, I got to the point where I just knew God couldn't love me.  
 Jesus couldn't be anything but sick of me.  
 I was too bad.  
 Too inherently evil.  
 I was wired to be automatically bad.  
 It was going to take too much effort,  
 way more spiritual stamina than I had,

to be good enough for Jesus to love me.

And I gave up.

I said to myself, Forget it.

I'm hopeless.

I'm just going to have to make do, as best I can.

I'll keep going to church,

I'll keep doing Christian work,

to keep up appearances;

but behind closed doors, in the secret places of my life,

I'm just gonna do whatever I feel like doing,

whatever I can get away with,

without getting caught,

because "Jesus loves me" can't be true.

This has to be some empty superstition.

Maybe it's a clever strategy that organized religion made up to get people to obey their rules and give big offerings.

But it's not working for me.

"Jesus loves me" is just not a realistic goal for me.

It's too hard to do what it takes

to get Jesus to love me.

\* \* \*

My life deteriorated.

I'm embarrassed by my past.

I trashed a marriage.

I trashed the lives of other women.

I deceived my friends.

I was in business, and I deceived my clients.

I was so drained of hope that I would wake up in the morning exhausted,

and not even want to get out of bed;

then I'd finally get up and put on my happy face,

and go about the day's activities like a good little Christian;

and then I would get home at night

and the façade would collapse,

and I would run on adrenaline,

staying up, staying up, later and later,

just avoiding going to sleep, because I didn't want to face the start of another day.

But you know what I heard at the very bottom of that pit that my life had become?

When I was lower than I ever thought I could get —

and I wasn't even listening for the voice of God,

or hoping to hear anything from heaven;

I was just dragging along,

day after day,

just surviving —

you know what I heard, down in that horrible, lonely pit?

*“Jesus loves me, this I know,  
for the Bible tells me so.  
Little ones to him belong;  
they are weak, but he is strong.  
Yes, Jesus loves me.  
Yes, Jesus loves me.  
Yes, Jesus loves me.  
The Bible tells me so.”*

Something inside me kept *insisting* that it was true.  
That Jesus really was alive.  
That he really was who he said he was.  
That he really did do what he said he did, and that he really did do it for *me*, because he loved me.  
Something inside me kept insisting that Jesus *hadn't given up on me*.

How could this be true?  
I had been so bad, in so many ways, for so many years —  
and what's worse, I had covered it up.  
I had pretended to be good.

But that quiet voice wouldn't go away.  
That silent voice that kept whispering, deep down in my gut,  
*“Here I am, and I love you anyhow.”*  
Could this be possible?  
*“Here I am, and I love you anyhow.”*  
Could this be real?  
*“Here I am, and I love you anyhow.”*  
Didn't this have to be *just me* deluding myself?  
Making it up, in my imagination, because I was in such desperate shape?  
*“Here I am, and I love you anyhow.”*

I didn't know what to do except go back to the Bible —  
that book that I'd heard about my whole life,  
that book that I'd had read to me, and preached to me —  
plenty of people had told me what it said,  
but I had to admit,  
I had never really gone in there and found Jesus for myself.  
To see what he really said.  
To see what he really meant.

To tell you the truth, I actually went back to the Bible to see if there was some kind of  
*loophole*  
that I could get in through,



some kind of fine print that would let him love me.  
Even in my sorry condition.

Ten years ago Phillip Yancey wrote a book called *The Jesus I Never Knew*, and years later, when I read his book, I realized that he and I had been on a similar journey, and in fact many people have traveled this road at various times down through history.

Do you know what I found when I actually looked in that book called the Bible?

I found a Jesus who liked being around people like me, sinners, failures, people who kept messing up.

I found a Jesus who people-like-me liked being around.

A Jesus who got invited to parties like I enjoyed.

In the historical record we find Jesus being invited to dinner parties eight times, five of them with people who you'd never find a church today,

people with no religious credentials,

they didn't attend a church,

they didn't really care about church,

they were just trying to get by in life,

have a good time, make good choices, *normal* people with normal problems

and Jesus was there.

He could relate.

I found a Jesus who hung out with prostitutes, people with obvious ties to organized crime, people with repulsive diseases.

I found a Jesus who seemed to be able to enjoy the kind of person who's embarrassing in a social situation; do you know what I mean? The kind of person who always says the wrong thing, or doesn't know when to shut up?

I found a Jesus who made people feel comfortable even if they were part of a different ethnic group from the rest of the group,

or even if they were obviously way less educated, or less intelligent, than the rest of the group.

I found a Jesus who had a really negative reaction to religion,

a Jesus who reserved his harshest words for religious people.

People who were totally focused on the rules and regulations made him crazy.

Legalism and mindless traditions made him so frustrated — because he cared more about people than about organizations and their systems of operation, even churches.

You know what Jesus said when the religious people objected?

**Matthew 9:12,13:**

**Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.... I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."**

When I personally looked for the real Jesus,

I found a Jesus I never knew before.

He wasn't looking for people who already had their act together.  
 He was there for people like me,  
 people who felt there was no way they could ever *get* their act together,  
 and he would help them.

He met a woman who had been caught in adultery. He didn't condemn her. He loved her, cared for her authentically.

He met a guy who had stolen all kinds of money from his clients. He didn't condemn the guy. He loved him, cared for him authentically.

Everywhere he turned, same deal.

Jesus had a wonderful way of keeping in focus the fact that everybody's in the same boat.

Nobody's better or worse; **every human being is imperfect.**

The people who make religious rules aren't really any better than those who try to follow them, or even those who ignore them.

**The only standard worth anything is God's standard, and nobody meets it.**

Everybody falls short.

**Romans 3:23** says, "...All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Lucky for me, Jesus loves me — in fact, he *likes* me.

It's lucky for me because he's the only one who can help me get on God's good side.

He's the only one who can bridge the gap between *us*, messed up as we are, and *God*, perfect as he is.

Our only hope as human beings is for Jesus to make us right with God.

This was his whole thing when he lived on earth in the form of a man, and this is still his whole thing, as he continues to live in the hearts of people like us who have decided to give our lives to him.

He says, "Sure, you've messed up.

Everybody's messed up in one way or another, or two ways, or three ways, or lots of ways.

But I love you anyhow."

**Romans 5:8** says, "...God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Are you waiting to get good enough before you let Jesus into your life?

You're too late.

He couldn't wait. He loved you too much.

So he has already paid your debts.

You know what this Compass Fellowship is? It's full of sinners.

You know what any church is? Full of sinners.

Failures.

People struggling to figure life out.

People who have messed up.

People who have even said, "God, please help me," and he's helped them, and they've managed to mess up again.

We're people who don't know what's right in some cases.  
 Or we know what's right, but we don't want to do it.  
 Or we're doing what's right, but we're hating it.

And you know what Jesus says when he looks at this motley crew called The Compass Fellowship?

He says exactly what he said to that woman 2,000 years ago:  
 "Nobody can condemn you, because no human being is perfect.  
 And I don't condemn you either.  
 I just love you.  
 Because that's what I'm here for."  
 His love for us is not "if" love, not "because" love, but "anyhow" love.

The day came when I finally realized,  
 Hey, Jesus is not at all like what I thought.  
 He was telling the truth.  
 He loves me.  
 I thought he was mad at me. He was just hurting for me.  
 I thought he was disgusted with me. He was just hoping I'd let him pick me up again.  
 I thought he must hate me. He just keeps loving me.

Some days I feel like I'll never get better,  
 I'll never get wiser, I'll never get stronger,  
 I'm just going to keep dropping the ball spiritually,  
 and yet,  
 Jesus loves me anyhow.  
 That's amazing.  
 That's wonderful.  
 That's so bizarre, it's hard to believe.  
 But it's true.  
 "Jesus loves me, this I know,"  
 not only because "the Bible tells me so":  
 I have experienced it.  
 I have felt it.  
 I know it.  
 It has happened to me.

I don't mean to say that life is, you know, "happy all the day."  
 I still face stress, and problems, and temptations.  
 I am still disappointed. I still get angry.  
 But I have a source of strength that I didn't have before.  
 I have a kind of hope that I didn't have before.  
 Because I have someone to go through the process with me.  
 Someone who understands and doesn't beat up on me for what I'm going through.  
 Someone who cries with me when I'm crying.  
 Someone who celebrates with me when I'm doing good.

Someone who just absolutely loves me. No holds barred.

When the light finally dawned that Jesus loves me — not because I've gotten good enough for him to love me, but just because he's decided to love me, no matter what — I let him love me.

I said, "OK, I don't get it, why you would love me, it doesn't make any sense, but come on."

I let his love in.

And you know what? His love turned out to be stronger than the love of a marriage partner.

His love was stronger than the love of a friend.

His love was stronger than the love of a child for a parent.

His love had a power that goes way beyond anything you get from a human being.

And it changed me.

It gave me a longing to do the right thing when I had a chance to do the wrong thing.

Not that I always made the right choice, but my longings began to change.

In **Ezekiel 36:26,27** God says to us: **"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you.... And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."**

Decrees and laws — those are just the old-fashioned phrases that refer to God's design for our lives.

This is not an empty promise that God has made here. It's fact. I *experienced* this.

His love gave me an enthusiasm for making healthy, constructive decisions instead of unhealthy, destructive decisions.

This wasn't a hellfire-and-brimstone, follow-the-rules-or-you're-dead kind of grinding-it-out existence,

but the *thrill* of knowing that I am loved, no matter what; I am loved *not* because of how well I do,

but just because I am who I am.

Jesus loves me, all messed up.

Jesus loves me, confused and stupid.

Jesus loves me, angry and tired of it all.

Jesus loves me, absolutely, unconditionally, no if's and's or but's, no small print, no loopholes, no tricks, no hoops to jump through.

He has just decided to love me,

and all I have to do is receive it.

It's free.

It's a gift.

I can't earn it, I don't deserve it, I just need it.

I want it.

I don't understand it.

All I can do is say, "This is amazing"

and receive it

and thank God that it's this simple —  
 because if I had to be good to get it,  
 I would never get it.  
 I would never feel his love.  
 I could never experience the change that has happened, deep down inside me, and  
 flowing out into every area of my life as a result of it.

When I decided to take Jesus at his word, and trust him to be telling me the truth about  
 how much he loves me,  
 my life kind of went “click.”  
 It locked in to the place I knew it needed to be.  
 I had finally come to terms with the way God designed me, all the way back when he  
 first dreamed me up.

The term the Bible uses to describe this feeling is **“peace ... which transcends all  
 understanding” (Philippians 4:7).**

You can experience the same kind of peace, starting today.  
 You can come to terms with Jesus, and that feeling of uneasiness about him that you  
 may have carried around for a long, long time, will be a thing of the past.  
 It doesn't take joining any church or going through any religious ritual.  
 It just takes saying to him, silently, in your heart, “OK, I'm going to trust you to be telling  
 the truth about loving me so much.  
 I don't understand it; I don't deserve it; I can't earn it; but I need this. I want it. Let your  
 Spirit fill my life, and let's see what happens.”

Would you bow your heart with me in prayer, and let's talk to God together.  
 The words I say aren't magic; you can talk to God in your own words.  
 But as I lead in prayer, you can express the same ideas to God in your own heart, and  
 receive the love that Jesus wants to flow into your life.

Pray with me:

“OK, Jesus, I'm going to trust you to be telling the truth about loving me so much.  
 I don't understand your love; I don't deserve it; I can't earn it; but I realize that I need it,  
 because nothing else is going to satisfy this need deep down inside me. I want  
 your love to start re-shaping my life. Let your Spirit fill my life, Jesus, and let's  
 see what happens. Amen.”

Now if you have made a commitment like that to Jesus today for the first time in your  
 life, I'd really love to know about it.

Would you let me know? You can contact us online at [compassfellowship.com](http://compassfellowship.com).  
 We'd love to be a part of getting you started on your spiritual journey with your new best  
 friend, Jesus Christ.