

Irreligious: Forsaking Religion and Finding Jesus' Lord (Mk. 12:35-37)

Chris Altmann – August 15, 2010

Robin Meyers grew up in Churches of Christ.¹ Along his journey, however, he became disenchanted not only with Churches of Christ, but with all theologically conservative groups. In his book Saving Jesus From the Church Meyers describes this disenchantment as him rejecting Christ but embracing Jesus. In fact, the subtitle to his book is “How to Stop Worshiping Christ and Start Following Jesus.” Meyers began to make a distinction between the “Christ” whom conservative mainline churches have historically emphasized and the “Jesus” whom Meyers had rediscovered recently in the pages of the Bible. Meyers ultimately became repulsed by people who mistreated others yet said they believed in the orthodox doctrines about Christ (e.g., the virgin birth, the miracles of Christ, and his resurrection from the dead). Meyers came to believe that all of these doctrinal matters about Christ were of little significance. What mattered most was living out the example left behind by Jesus—treating people the way Jesus would.

Myers' choice, of course, a false choice. We don't have to choose either the teachings and example of “Jesus” or the doctrines about “Christ.” We must ultimately choose both. We cannot decide between worshiping the deity of Christ and following the love teachings of Jesus. We must choose both.

But Meyers illustrates an important issue. *Sometimes we face real dichotomies regarding Jesus.* For example, Jesus often befriended and hung out with sinful people. Yet Jesus was also often heard passionately condemning sin in people. In addition, Jesus was divine and knew his death would be temporary. Yet Jesus was also human and prayed passionately in the Garden for God to stop his death. Sometimes we face dichotomies regarding Jesus.

One of those dichotomies is the center of the storm raging in this morning's text: *35 And as Jesus taught in the temple, he said, "How can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David? 36 David himself, in the Holy Spirit, declared, "'The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.' 37 David himself calls him Lord. So how is he his son?" And the great throng heard him gladly. (Mk. 12:35-37 ESV)* This is the final debate of the ten debates we've explored from Mark's Gospel. As with the previous five debates, this one takes place in the temple in Jerusalem.

In this final debate Jesus raises a dichotomy about himself. Jesus speaks about himself in the third person, referring to “the Christ.” The Old Testament taught that God would raise a king of all kings who would represent God and God's agenda upon the earth. He would be known as the Messiah (in Hebrew) or Christ (in Greek). And one of the favorite labels which the scribes, Pharisees and others used for the Christ was “son of David.” The Old Testament taught that the Christ would be a descendent of the great Jewish king David.² Thus the “Christ” was often called the “son of David.” For example, earlier in Mk. 10:47 a blind man named Bartimaeus hears Jesus pass by and Bartimaeus cries out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” One of

the most common ways of talking about the “Christ” was to talk about him as the “son of David.”

Jesus, however, takes issue with this title. He questions whether “son of David” is an appropriate title for the Christ. Obviously Jesus is not refuting the fact that the Christ descends from King David. Both Matthew and Luke point out that Jesus did descend from King David. Some scholars suggest that Jesus is highlighting the fact that the phrase “son of David” does not appear in the Old Testament in reference to the Christ. But I doubt Jesus would pick a fight over such a small technicality. Nowhere does Jesus distance himself from the truth that the Old Testament affirms that the Christ is the son of David, even if the Old Testament never uses that exact phrase. Instead, Jesus seems to be taking issue with what that title has come to mean in Judaism. Jesus wants to deconstruct the picture which the contemporary Jew has in his mind when he thinks of the Christ as the “son of David.”

When most Jews thought about the “son of David” the picture in their minds was often a political one. After all, Israel had a long and sad history of living under the thumb of the reigning world superpower. There was Egypt. Then Assyria. Then Babylon. Then Persia. Then Rome. And no Jew was happy about this. The commonly held hope was that when the Christ came on the scene, he would change all of this. He would free Israel from her pagan master and usher in a new period of peace and prosperity. Those were the sorts of things pictured in the mind of the contemporary Jew when he thought of the “son of David.”

Jesus doesn’t like what people think of when they think of that label. So Jesus points to an alternate label for the Christ. He uses Ps. 110. The Psalm is attributed to King David. And it begins this way: *1The LORD says to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.”* (Ps. 110:1 ESV). The first “LORD” refers to God. King David says he heard God speak—“The LORD says...” David heard God speaking. And to whom was God speaking? God, David says, was speaking to “my Lord”—“The LORD says to my Lord.” King David heard God speaking to someone whom David calls “my Lord.” Jesus says “my Lord” is a reference to the Christ. According to Jesus, in this Psalm, King David heard God—the LORD—speak to the Christ—whom David calls “my Lord.” David was a king. Everyone else should call him “my Lord.” Yet here David calls the Christ “my Lord.” King David understood that there was someone with more authority than his—the Christ. There was someone with more power than his—the Christ.

And to the one higher than even King David, God said, *“Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.”* Placing enemies under one’s feet was a sign of sovereignty and victory in the ancient near east.³ God doesn’t tell David that David’s enemies will be conquered and that David will be victorious. God tells the Christ that the Christ’s enemies will be conquered and that Christ will be victorious. God promises to completely remove anything standing in the way of the rule and reign of the Christ.

Psalm 110 raises a dichotomy between Jesus as “son” and Jesus as “Lord.” The designation “son” in the Psalm points to the Christ’s relationship with David. He is the “son” of David. He

descended from David. But the designation “Lord” in the Psalm points to the Christ’s relationship with God. He is the “Lord” at the right hand of God. The word “son” leans in the direction of the humanity of the Christ. He came from a human family. The word “Lord” leans in the direction of the deity of the Christ. The word “son” might suggest to some his role as a political leader over the nation of Israel. The word “Lord” suggests his role as cosmic ruler over all nations.

Jesus was revealing that what people thought about the Christ when they thought of him as “son of David” was not correct. If they had personal political ambitions as they thought about the Christ as “son of David,” they should think again. Because the Christ was not coming as just a bright star in the political future of Israel. He was coming as Lord, as ruler, as king over all nations.

And this ancient struggle to understand the Christ points to some modern struggles as well. Today, *religion presents the Christ as “servant” while Jesus presents the Christ as “Sovereign.”* There may have been a tendency in Jesus’ day, when thinking of the Christ as “son of David,” to think of him as the “servant of David.” Whatever King David’s agenda, the Christ was the servant of that agenda. Whatever King David’s goals, the Christ was the means toward those goals.

But Jesus presents himself here not as “servant” in that regard, but “Sovereign.” King David stands below, not above, the Christ. King David’s desires stand below, not above, those of the Christ. The Christ is not a means toward David’s ends or Israel’s ends. Just the opposite. Israel and David are the means toward the Christ’s ends. The Christ is not “servant” of Israel or David. He is sovereign over Israel and David.

Linda Seger illustrates a contemporary form of this problem in her 2006 book [Jesus Rode a Donkey: Why Republicans Don’t Have the Corner on Christ.](#)⁴ Seger tries to show how Democratic policies, not Republican policies, best align with the teachings of Jesus. Whether she is right or wrong is not my point. The point is that in our culture, Jesus is often used to promote the agenda of political parties. He is presented as “servant” of whatever political party wishes to wield him.

And religion often falls into this same trap. Religion can imply that Jesus supports this political party or this political party, whichever political party is going to make it easier for that religion to gain prominence in the United States.

But religion can do this in other ways as well. Televangelists are infamous for this. They use Jesus as a means to their goals of wealth and luxury. Jesus is just their servant, a way to get what they really want.

Yet Jesus presents himself to us not as servant of our agendas and wishes but as sovereign over those agendas and wishes. The Highland Church of Christ cannot use Jesus to get our way. Jesus wants to use the Highland Church of Christ to get his way. No political party can use Jesus

to fulfill their platform. Jesus seeks to use them to fulfill his platform. Religion presents the Christ as “servant.” But Jesus presents the Christ as “Sovereign.”

There is another modern element to the dichotomy raised in this text. The word “son” pointed to the human lineage of the Christ. He was the human son of the human King David. But the word “Lord” pointed to the divine origin of the Christ. He was deity. He was divine.

And sometimes that human identity of the Christ overshadows the divine identity of the Christ. And it shows up in this way: *Religion presents the Christ as pastor. Jesus presents the Christ as Master.* The word “son” in the text points to the human side of the Christ. And that is one of the sides of Christ toward which we are most drawn. Because it’s the pastoral side of Jesus. He knows what it’s like to be hungry. He knows what it’s like to be tired. He can relate to having too much to do. He can identify with my problems. Because he is human.

And this makes Jesus a wonderful pastor. He can comfort. He can counsel. He can connect in meaningful ways. I remember a time about a decade ago when I was really wrestling with the fact that many in my extended family were not followers of Jesus. And a friend named Ed Gray reminded me that there was a time when some of Jesus’ family members rejected him. Ed reminded me that Jesus knew what I was feeling because Jesus had felt that himself. Jesus’ experiences as a human being make him a perfect pastor.

And that certainly is an important side to Jesus. We desperately need a Christ who has walked in our shoes, who knows what it’s like to be human. That’s the only way he can truly be our pastor.

But in religion that’s the only side to Christ. And Jesus does not wish to be one-sided. In this text, he points beyond the word “son” which highlights his humanity, and lands on the word “Lord.” With this word, Jesus demonstrates that he does not merely wish to be pastor. He also wishes to be Master.

Kevin DeYoung writes about our tendency to view Jesus as everything but Lord, as everything but Master:⁵

There’s the Republican Jesus—who is against tax increases and activist judges, for family values and owning firearms.

There’s Democrat Jesus—who is against Wall Street and Wal-Mart, for reducing our carbon footprint and printing money.

There’s Therapist Jesus—who helps us cope with life’s problems, heals our past, tells us how valuable we are and not to be so hard on ourselves.

There’s Starbucks Jesus—who drinks fair trade coffee, loves spiritual conversations, drives a hybrid, and goes to film festivals.

There’s Open-minded Jesus—who loves everyone all the time no matter what (except for people who are not as open-minded as you).

There’s Touchdown Jesus—who helps athletes run faster and jump higher than non-Christians and determines the outcomes of Super Bowls.

There's Martyr Jesus—a good man who died a cruel death so we can feel sorry for him.

There's Gentle Jesus—who was meek and mild, with high cheek bones, flowing hair, and walks around barefoot, wearing a sash (while looking very German).

There's Hippie Jesus—who teaches everyone to give peace a chance, imagines a world without religion, and helps us remember that "all you need is love."

There's Yuppie Jesus—who encourages us to reach our full potential, reach for the stars, and buy a boat.

There's Spirituality Jesus—who hates religion, churches, pastors, priests, and doctrine, and would rather have people out in nature, finding "the god within" while listening to ambiguously spiritual music.

There's Platitute Jesus—good for Christmas specials, greeting cards, and bad sermons, inspiring people to believe in themselves.

There's Revolutionary Jesus—who teaches us to rebel against the status quo, stick it to the man, and blame things on "the system."

There's Guru Jesus—a wise, inspirational teacher who believes in you and helps you find your center.

There's Boyfriend Jesus—who wraps his arms around us as we sing about his intoxicating love in our secret place.

There's Good Example Jesus—who shows you how to help people, change the planet, and become a better you.

And then there's Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God. Not just another prophet. Not just another Rabbi. Not just another wonder-worker...This Jesus was the Creator come to earth and the beginning of a New Creation...This Jesus is the Christ that God spoke of to the Serpent; the Christ prefigured to Noah in the flood; the Christ promised to Abraham; the Christ prophesied through Balaam before the Moabites; the Christ guaranteed to Moses before he died; the Christ promised to David when he was king; the Christ revealed to Isaiah as a Suffering Servant; the Christ predicted through the Prophets and prepared for through John the Baptist. This Christ is not a reflection of the current mood or the projection of our own desires. He is our Lord and God. He is the Father's Son, Savior of the world, and substitute for our sins—more loving, more holy, and more wonderfully terrifying than we ever thought possible.

Religion offers you a Jesus who will be any of those on DeYoung's list. But what Jesus offers is himself as Lord and Master. The ruler. The boss. The CEO. The President. The King. The chief. The commander. The one in charge.

As Jesus ends these ten conflicts with religion, he does so by pointing to himself as the one who towers above all that religion and all that conflict and all that power struggle. He is Lord. He is Master. He will not be argued into a corner. He will not be dismissed as irrelevant. He will not be browbeaten. He will be heard. He will be respected.

This, of course, is not meant to scare off anyone. For most of this series we've seen a portrait of religion that ought to scare people off religion and toward Jesus. But as we end this series, we pause a moment before we rush to Jesus unthinkingly. The one thing religion has going for it is its willingness to let Jesus be whatever you want him to be. Ultimately, I think that's what

Jesus was pointing to in this text. Contemporary Jews used “son of David” to make the Christ be who they wanted him to be. But if you decide to really follow Jesus, you decide to let Jesus make you whatever he wants you to be. He becomes not merely your servant but your Sovereign. He becomes not just your pastor. But your Master.

¹ Robin Meyers, [Saving Jesus from the Church: How to Stop Worshiping Christ and Start Following Jesus](#) (HarperOne: Reprint Edition, 2010), 6.

² 2 Sam. 7:8-16; Ps. 89:3-4; Isa. 9:2-7; 11:1-9; Jer. 23:5-6; 30:9; 33:15-17, 22; Ezek. 34:23-24; 37:24; Hosea 3:5; Amos 9:11.

³ Wood, D. R. W., & Marshall, I. H. (1996). [New Bible dictionary](#) (3rd ed.) (380). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press.

⁴ Linda Seger, [Jesus Rode a Donkey: Why Republicans Don't Have the Corner on Christ](#) (Adams Media, 2006).

⁵ Kevin DeYoung, "Who Do You Say That I Am?" from his DeYoung, Restless, and Reformed blog (6-10-09).