

Do You Accept All of Christ or Just Part of Him?

What does it mean to “accept Christ”? What are we asking a person to do?

Traditionally, this has involved believing as true certain things about Jesus: that he is the Son of God and, thus, divine himself; that he was born of a virgin; that he died on the cross for our sins and was resurrected from the dead; and that he is returning to earth in victory over the forces of evil.

I call these data points about Jesus, and they are pretty consistent throughout Christianity as at least the minimum that a person needs to know and believe in order to be saved.

These data points are the ones covered in the historical creeds and confessions of faith.

Noticeably absent from many of these creeds and confessions are Jesus’ teachings about loving your enemies, putting down swords, loving and including sinners into your community of faith, justice for the poor and oppressed, and equality for women and foreigners, although they are central to his teachings and the way he lived his life.

Early Christians, however, understood that the data points were shorthand for all of these things.

Thus, when they accepted the data points, they understood that they were accepting a way of life that was characterized by nonviolent confrontation with the powers that regularly oppress the poor, women and children, foreigners and ethnic minorities, a life that will lead to much suffering and persecution and perhaps even death, but which will be vindicated by resurrection and life in God’s earthly kingdom.

We have lost much of that understanding. For instance, for Christians to call Jesus “son of God” is a way to indicate his divinity, but to the Israelites of Jesus’ day a “son of God” is simply a person who has a close relationship with God.

In Egyptian, Greek and Roman societies, however, it did indicate a divine

relationship with the gods. In particular, Caesar Augustus was declared to be “son of God.”

Thus, the gospel writers were challenging Augustus and his way of ruling with Jesus and his way of ruling.

Augustus ruled with violence. He brought peace to a land by conquering and occupying the land, exploiting the weak, demanding taxes and tribute from those who barely had enough to survive. Pretty much the opposite of Jesus.

The earliest Christians knew that when they accepted Jesus as the son of God, they were repudiating Augustus and his way while receiving Jesus’ way as their own. And this is true of all the other data points about Jesus.

Jesus’ conception by the Holy Spirit and birth by the virgin Mary was also a challenge to the supremacy of Augustus’ way.

Jesus’ refusal to pick up a sword and acceptance of the cross showed that he would stand up for the poor and weak against the powers that be and was willing to die in his commitment to nonviolence.

And his resurrection vindicated this way of life.

The earliest Christians knew this and their lives reflected their acceptance of Jesus.

They cared for the poor and the sick, they refused to participate in Caesar’s wars, they were persecuted for not believing Caesar was a god and for being unpatriotic and disloyal to Rome.

They accepted not only the data points, but also the larger message that the data pointed to. We have lost much of that.

There are Christians who accept the data points about Jesus and yet reject his teaching.

They still advocate violence toward enemies, do little to help the poor, favor discrimination against foreigners and minorities, and exclude particular sinners from their faith communities.

If I sound judgmental, let me be clear: I was one of those Christians. That is the

faith I was raised in. Maybe you were too.

The more I studied the teachings of Jesus, the more I realized that accepting the data points is useless unless I accept what they are pointing toward.

It's a much harder way of being a Christian, but for me at least, it's the only way.

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