

Jesus at the Centre

- seeking a Christ centred faith

THE CENTRALITY OF JESUS

Christ centred life

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets
at many times and in various ways,
but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son,
whom he appointed heir of all things,
and through whom he made the universe.
[Hebrews 1:1-2]

The testimony of this anonymous author - and the theme of Hebrews - is that God has revealed himself in many ways but that in Jesus Christ he has provided the ultimate and definitive revelation. Jesus is the focal point, the central theme, the pinnacle of God's self-disclosure. He is central, not only for salvation, but for everything.

This does not mean that what God said previously is now obsolete, nor that God no longer speaks through prophets and in various ways - but it does mean that every other revelation is tested against the ultimate revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

It means that followers of Jesus are committed to a Christocentric approach to life, to work, to church, to moral decisions, to priorities, to worship, to finance, to the Bible, to leadership, to everything.

Does this sound rather obvious? Aren't all Christians Christocentric? No. To explain why, we will need to travel back in time to the year 312 CE and become spectators at a series of events that were to change dramatically the way in which the church operated - and the way in which it responded to Jesus. [You have already looked briefly at this period in the 'Forest and Desert' session.]

CONSTANTINE AND CHRISTENDOM

A Christian society?

The Roman Empire was in turmoil. After centuries of dominance, the empire was showing signs of age - the bureaucracy was creaking, moral standards were low, the old forms of religion seemed empty, barbarians were attacking the frontiers. Despite almost 300 years of persecution, and despite still being an illegal society, the church was one of the few remaining stabilising and civilising influences. Their sacrificial care for victims during a recent outbreak of plague had won them many admirers, even if their convictions still seemed strange.

In 312, there were two claimants to the imperial throne. Maxentius held the capital city, Rome, and most of Italy, but Constantine held most of the Western empire and



had marched on Rome. In October 312, he was camped north of the city preparing for what would be the show-down with his rival, but worried because he did not have the resources for a long siege. Then something unusual happened.

According to both Christian and pagan writers of the time, Constantine had a vision, in which he saw the sign of the cross with the sun rising behind it, and saw or heard the words 'In this sign conquer'. In response, Constantine had the sign of the cross painted on to his soldiers' equipment.

To everyone's surprise, Maxentius decided to risk a battle outside the city walls and Constantine's army won a decisive victory, forcing their opponents back across the Milvian Bridge into the city. Constantine became emperor, convinced that the God of the Christians had given him victory.

Historians have argued for centuries about whether Constantine was genuinely converted, but what is certain is that he saw Christianity as a force that could unite and revive his crumbling empire. The persecution ended, Christianity became a legal religion and Constantine invited church leaders to assist him in making the Roman Empire a Christian society.

In the following decades it seemed like revival - massive church growth, wonderful new church buildings, changes in laws and customs, church leaders taking on political and social roles, Constantine ruling as a Christian emperor. By the end of the century, Christianity had become the state religion, the *only* legal religion, and it was pagans who were being persecuted. The system known as *Christendom* was coming into being, an alliance between church and state that would dominate Europe for over 1000 years and which still impacts the way Christians think and act.

THE CHRISTENDOM SHIFT

Different opinions

Two opposite assessments have been made of what happened in the fourth century:

- That this was a God-given opportunity which the church rightly seized and which ensured the triumph of the church and of Christianity in Europe
- That this was a disaster that perverted the church, compromised its calling and hindered its mission, achieving through infiltration what 300 years of persecution had failed to achieve. That this was not the triumph of the church over the empire but the triumph of the empire over the church

Character of Christendom

Christendom meant:

- The adoption of Christianity as the official religion of city, state or empire
- The assumption that all citizens (except for the Jews) were Christian by birth



- The development of a 'sacral society', where there was no effective distinction between sacred and secular, where religion and politics were inter-twined
- The definition of 'orthodoxy' as the common belief, determined by socially powerful clerics supported by the state
- The imposition of a supposedly 'Christian morality' on the entire population [although normally moral standards from the Hebrew scriptures were applied]
- A political and religious division of the world into 'Christendom' and 'heathendom'
- The defence of Christianity by legal sanctions to restrain heresy, immorality and schism, and by warfare to protect or extend Christendom
- A hierarchical ecclesiastical system, based on a diocesan and parish arrangement, which was analogous to the state hierarchy and was buttressed by state support
- A generic distinction between clergy and laity, and the relegation of the laity to a largely passive role
- Obligatory church attendance, with penalties for non-compliance
- The practice of infant baptism as the symbol of obligatory incorporation into this Christian society
- The imposition of obligatory tithes to fund this system

The basis of the Constantinian system was a close partnership between the church and the state. The form of this partnership might vary, with either partner dominant, or with a balance of power existing between them. There are examples from the 4th century onwards both of emperors presiding over church councils and of emperors doing penance imposed by bishops. Throughout the mediaeval period, power struggles between popes and emperors resulted in one or other holding sway for a time. But the Christendom system assumed that the church was associated with the Christian status quo and had vested interests in its maintenance. The church provided religious legitimation for state activities, and the state provided secular force to back up ecclesiastical decisions.

Contrasting views

Supporters of Christendom have argued that this system enabled the lordship of Christ to be exercised over every aspect of society and that it demonstrated the triumph of the gospel. Enthusiastic church leaders spoke of the fulfilment of the Great Commission and of the arrival of the millennium. This was the basis of the early church historian, Eusebius' approval of Constantine, whose biography he wrote. More recently, Abraham Kuyper [quoted in Leonard Verduin 'Anatomy of a Hybrid'] has expressed similar approval of this development:

'When the first contest eventuated in this that the emperor bowed to Jesus, then... the kingship of Christ began to be triumphant in society... The kingship of Christ from this time on stood as a direction-giving power above the imperial power, which, in order to strengthen its influence, tried for an ever-increasingly close integration with the

kingship of Jesus...When in the fourth century persecution ceased and the imperial power evinced a readiness to accommodate itself to Jesus, the basic victory became apparent...This principal victory continued on during the entire course of the long period known as the Middle Ages'.

But opponents of Christendom have considered that this 'victory' was achieved at the expense of surrendering on many important issues and have judged that, in fact, Christianity had been conquered and domesticated. Rather than society being sanctified, the church had been secularised. They have pointed out that it is not easy to fit into the Constantinian framework certain key elements of the Christianity of the New Testament and the first three centuries. Constantinian thinking seems to have no place for elements of a New Testament vision such as:

- Believers' churches comprised only of voluntary members
- Believers' baptism as the means of incorporation into the church
- A clear distinction between 'church' and 'world'
- Evangelism and mission [except through military conquest of or missions to 'heathen' nations]
- The supranational vision of the new Christian 'nation'
- Faith in Christ as the exercise of choice in a pluralistic environment where other choices are possible without penalty

Redefining Christianity

Other elements of New Testament Christianity appear to be redefined within Christendom :-

- 'Church' is defined territorially and membership in it is compulsory; the voluntary communities called 'churches' in the New Testament are now called 'sects'
- A preoccupation with the immortality of the soul replaces the expectation of the kingdom of God, and the concept of the kingdom of God is either reduced to a purely historical entity, coterminous with the state church, or relegated to a supra-historical or future realm
- The church abandons its prophetic role in society in favour of a role that is primarily priestly, providing spiritual support for groups and individuals and sanctifying social occasions and state policies
- Discipleship is interpreted in terms of good citizenship, rather than commitment to the ways of the kingdom of God
- The church becomes primarily concerned about social order rather than social justice
- Persecution is imposed by those claiming to be Christians rather than upon them

Some contemporary writers have expressed agreement with the negative view of Christendom held by generations of dissidents. Jurgen Moltmann, for example, wrote ['The Power of the Powerless'] that for this apparent victory :-



'The church had to pay a high price: it had to take over the role of the political religion... Now the church was there for everyone. Its mission reached everywhere. But as what? It reached everyone only as a component part of the political order - as the state religion of the political government.'

Vinoth Ramachandra ['Gods That Fail'] argues :-

'A movement that proclaimed grace and practised justice, a faith that had at its centre a crucified man as the hope of human and cosmic transformation, could not have been converted to a religious civilisation like any other without serious damage to its very essence.'

Others have suggested that the church had no option in the 4th century but to accept imperial endorsement and that Christendom, despite its excesses, was a providential means of Christianising culture and advancing God's kingdom. Leslie Newbigin has concluded ['The Other Side of 1984'] :-

'How else, at that moment of history, could the Church have expressed its faithfulness to the gospel which is a message about the universal reign of God? It is hard to see what other possibility there was at that moment. The experiment of a Christian political order had to be made.'

However this arrangement is evaluated, for three-quarters of its history the church in Western Europe has operated within a Christendom framework. Only in the first three centuries, in persecuted dissident movements between the 4th and 16th centuries, and in the last five centuries, has this mindset been challenged. Constantinian thinking has influenced every aspect of theology and biblical interpretation. Church leaders under Christendom soon realised that the New Testament provided inadequate guidelines for organising the kind of sacral society or hierarchical church which was emerging, but they found many helpful structures in the Roman Empire which they often justified by appealing to the Hebrew scriptures. The model of church that operated within Christendom seemed to its critics to be an Israelite model. Their persistent calls for a restoration of New Testament models of church and discipleship expressed both their dissatisfaction with the way in which this model operated and disagreement as to its legitimacy.

Jesus marginalised

What has all this got to do with our subject - Jesus at the centre? Simply this, that the price to pay for Christendom was the marginalising of Jesus. This is always the price the church pays when it tries to assume power. And make no mistake - in the fourth century Jesus was marginalised.

The nation of Israel seemed analogous to the Christianised Roman Empire: both had borders to defend, armies to run, economic policies to determine, social institutions to maintain and a cultural heritage to value. Both recognised the ultimate government of God, exercised through his chosen and anointed leaders. The Hebrew scriptures seemed to provide patterns and models on issues where the New Testament, and

Jesus, were silent. Apparently, the triumph of Christianity had not been envisaged and no guidelines were provided for running a state religion. Furthermore, some of Jesus' teaching was difficult to apply in this new situation: how did a Christian emperor love his enemies? How could a Christian politician 'take no thought for tomorrow'? The Sermon on the Mount especially presented problems: perhaps it should be interpreted as relevant only for inter-personal relationships rather than public life, or regarded as an unattainable ideal in this age? In time, such teachings were regarded as 'counsels of perfection', rather than guidelines for discipleship.

The problem went deeper still. Fundamentally embarrassing for state Christianity was the fact that Jesus had been crucified by order of the Roman Empire, acting through Pilate, its representative. The cross which Constantine put on the shields of his soldiers did not make a good symbol for a state religion. The dangerous memory of what Jesus said and did, his dealings with political and religious authorities, his championing of the poor and criticism of injustice: these elements were not helpful in a situation where church leaders were becoming politicians and supporters of the status quo. Somehow, the connection between the radical Jesus and 4th century Christianity had to be loosened.

A comparison of various documents at the beginning of the 4th century and the beginning of the 5th century reveals this change of focus. In the hymns the churches sung, in the sermons preached, in the teaching given to catechumens, as well as in theological treatises, Jesus and his teaching are given less and less attention. The Christocentrism of the New Testament writers and the early churches is replaced by a theological system in which the life of Jesus seems to be of marginal importance. Of course, he was still honoured as Saviour and risen Lord, but the human Jesus [his example, lifestyle, teachings and relationships] were quietly ignored. He just did not fit the new arrangement, he was too awkward, too challenging, too threatening.

This marginalising of Jesus is most evident in the creeds. During the fourth and fifth centuries, attempts were made to summarise what Christians believed about the fundamental matters of faith. These creeds have had tremendous influence on the way in which Christians have thought about God, Jesus, the church and many other matters. But they were developed in the formative years of Christendom, when Jesus was being marginalised, and this shows through.

PRACTICAL EXERCISE

Consider the Nicene Creed, the origins of which were in a conference at Nicaea in 325, chaired by the emperor Constantine whose main concern was not theology but having a united church in his empire. The creed says quite a bit about Jesus, but what it does not say is just as important :-

THE NICENE CREED

*I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth,
and of all things, visible and invisible;*

And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds: God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.

Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven; and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary; and was made man.

And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; he suffered; and was buried. And the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven; and sits on the right hand of the Father. And he shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and giver of life; who proceeds from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spoke through the prophets.

And I believe in one catholic and apostolic church; I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

The creed affirms that Jesus is both divine and human but manages to ignore everything important about his human life, moving straight from his birth to his death. Where are his miracles, his relationships, his example, his teachings, his lifestyle? As in so many other fourth century documents, where is Jesus?

Christendom could cope with the divine Jesus and with a belief that Jesus was also human, but it could not cope with the reality of that human life. Though the creeds insist on his humanity, this seems little more than an abstract philosophical principle, unconnected to his way of life, relationships, teaching and miracles. The Jesus whom the churches expressed their faith in as they repeated the creeds was an exalted figure, a heavenly counterpart of the Christian emperor, remote and powerful, but no longer disturbing the status quo. And this has left a lasting legacy in European Christianity.

CHRISTOCENTRISM

Jesus is our model

Christocentrism insists that Jesus is at the centre of Christianity. That the human life of Jesus is vital and cannot be ignored. That Jesus is our model, our pioneer, our leader, our teacher, our example - as well as our redeemer. That he was truly human and that his humanity matters. That the awkward teachings of Jesus are relevant and authoritative in every area of life - in politics as much as in family life, in social policy as well as church life, in economics as well as personal morality. That the Sermon on the Mount is meant to be lived not just admired.

Christocentrism also insists that Jesus is the centre of the Bible, the one to whom all the scriptures point, the one through whom all the scriptures must be interpreted. We do not start elsewhere and then try to fit the teaching of Jesus in [or ignore him if this is too awkward]. We start with Jesus and interpret everything else in the light of what he models and teaches.

Some examples are the ways in which we think about:

- The status and role of women in church and society
- Our responses to injustice
- Leadership structures and practices

But this Christocentric approach affects all kinds of issues. It profoundly challenges the way we worship, evangelise, work, treat creation, run our churches, get involved in society, exercise power etc.

It is urgent that we recover this approach. It was this approach which enabled the early churches to turn the world upside down. It was this that challenged their contemporaries and amazed their persecutors. It was this that was lost through the Christendom shift.

But Christendom is dead or dying. We live now in a post-Christian society and we desperately need to stop thinking in Christendom categories. Europe has rejected Christendom.

Arguably it has not yet seen enough of Jesus to decide what to do with him. The real Jesus is our trump card. The real Jesus is strangely attractive to people. Jesus is our central theme, the church's best kept secret. It is time to rediscover Jesus and to follow him into a world that is heartily sick of Christianity but which might yet fall in love with Jesus.

Questions and Reflections

1. How do you evaluate the 'Christendom shift'? What else might church leaders have done in the 4th century?
2. What other subjects [alongside the examples given in these notes] might be affected by reading the Bible from a Christocentric perspective?
3. How can you [or your local church] help people to encounter the real Jesus?

Reading and Resources

- S Murray '**Post-Christendom**' pub Paternoster 2004
S Hauerwas '**After Christendom?**' pub Abingdon 1991
S Hauerwas & W Willimon '**Resident Aliens**' pub Abingdon 1991
A Kee '**Constantine versus Christ**' pub SCM Press 1982
A Kreider '**The Change Of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom**' pub Trinity Press International 1999
S Murray '**Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition**' pub Pandora 2000



L Newbigin '**The Gospel in a Pluralist Society**' pub SPCK 1989
L Verduin '**Anatomy of a Hybrid**' pub Eerdmans 1976

