

# *The New Teaching of Jesus*

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Mark 1:21-28

*“...He taught them as one having authority...”*

### *Movement 1 – Christ Takes Away Old Authority*

Everything has changed with Christ. Before Christ came, people had a way of dealing with things, with stress, with change, and with conflict. It was like the small town in the beginning of the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, everyone and everything had a purpose and fit together. But when Christ came through the town, everything changed.

Imagine this town in Galilee; Capernaum. Imagine that this was a town that worked together, played together, worshipped together and did everything else as one unit. Everyone had a role to play, everyone had a job to do, and everyone had his or her place. It was much like that town in *Fiddler on the Roof*. When questions arose about worship and other aspects of religion and faith, the people would turn to the scribes for a voice of authority. The scribes knew the traditions, they knew the teaching of past rabbis, they knew the Midrash, they knew about the latest in Biblical studies. They were the experts in the area of faith and religion for that town. Someone would approach a scribe with a question, or a puzzle. “What does this passage mean, and why would God say that.” The scribe would not miss a beat and explain the historical answers to the questions, demonstrate the ways that the most recent research illuminates the passage, and offer a number of deep and valid answers to the questions. The scribes were the authority and the experts on issues of faith and religion.

Every now and then a group of itinerate preachers would come through the town preaching one form of fire and brimstone or another. Every now and then, the visiting preacher would try to capture the attention and the imagination of the people listening. But something always seemed to be lacking. There was a noticeable difference in command of the passages. There was a noticeable awkwardness when the itinerate preacher tried to explain the questions through history. And then Joel would step in and the itinerate preacher was done. Joel was a man who was afflicted by a demon of sorts that would cause convulsions. Joel would scream, fall on the floor, and cause a great commotion. The itinerate preacher was faced with the choice – cure Joel, or admit a lack of power and leave. The scribes even said that Joel’s purpose in the town was to weed out the charlatans. Things were set, until Jesus came.

When Jesus first came to Capernaum, everyone thought he was another one of those itinerate preachers. But when he entered the synagogue and taught, the people’s mouths opened, their jaws dropped, and they were indeed astonished. His teaching was different. His mannerism was different. His knowledge was different. Jesus did not talk about the way scripture was handled throughout history. Jesus talked about the way God could be seen and experienced in scripture and in life. Jesus did not have to turn to the latest in biblical scholarship and confer with the other experts in the field for answers. Jesus spoke with a different kind of knowledge and authority than any of the scribes had. The people were astonished.

Then came Joel, and everyone wondered what would happen. They wondered if this preacher would be shamed as all the rest had been shamed and exposed as a charlatan and a fake. But Jesus instead continued to speak with authority and commanded the demon to leave Joel. All eyes immediately turned to the scribes who for the first time had nothing to say. They had lost their authority; they had lost their power, for no one had ever preached as Jesus had just preached. Their foundation of their spirituality had been cracked; the people had found a new teacher. Like getting a new computer, those who were in Capernaum may have felt as if everything was new and different. In a way it was. With this new teaching everything has changed.

## *Movement 2 – Top Heavy Authority in Christianity*

And the people scramble to make sense of the new teaching. They scramble to find a new footing and a new foundation in light of the new teaching they had heard from Jesus. Some were asking what Jesus meant when he claimed, “the Kingdom of God is at hand?” What did Jesus mean when he said that he was the vine and they were the branches? What was required of the people to truly and fully follow Jesus? They wanted to be sure that they were following Jesus closely and carefully and correctly. They wanted to be sure that they had gotten it right. Out of this arena of fear, doubt, and questions emerged some individuals who claimed they understood and knew about this Jesus. They claimed to be an authority on the person and ministry of Jesus and if the people would just fall in line with them, then everything would be ok. Like an overbearing mother controlling all of the followers thoughts and ideas, some have exercised that level of authority concerning faith in Jesus.

This is not a concept that is new to our faith, or unique to the early followers. Christianity is ripe with believers who rest in a kind of top-heavy authorial approach to faith in Jesus Christ. From the doctrinal statements offered by the Pope and other hat wearing men in the Catholic Church, to the individual mega-church, book-selling pastor who is riding the most recent wave of popularity, we have our leaders who relay upon a top-heavy model of authority. These are the ones who will tell you what it means to accept Jesus as your savior. These are the ones who will tell you what you must do to follow Jesus as a Christian. These are the ones who will dictate to you what you must wear, drive, eat, and think if you are to be a ‘good Christian.’

It is tempting to fall into such a group. It is tempting to find oneself as a part of such followers of Christ. After all, wouldn't it be nice to have all the answers, even if someone else gives them to us? After all, wouldn't it be nice to rest on the assurance that the person you follow and listen to really knows everything about Christ? We can find ourselves wrapped up with one cult of a personality or one gathering of a people that we give away our freedom to experience Christ on our own in exchange for the luxury of Christ being explained to us by others. Yet there is a danger in such a top-heavy authority. When dissent occurs, and dissent will occur, the reaction of the authority is normally persecution. The early Baptist dissented against infant baptism and were exiled or imprisoned by the ruling Church of England. Catholics were persecuted in an Anglican controlled Virginia (along with Baptists and Quakers and Methodists). Competing claims for authority about Jesus leads again and again to conflict and unfortunately violence.

Or sometimes the leader is just wrong. Last week I mentioned William Miller and his anticipated return of Jesus. He leads hundreds of thousands astray. Or today when people like Pat Robertson makes ridiculous statements about Christianity and God, claiming an unquestionable authority. We now run the risk of thinking that God may be punishing political leaders for abandoning a political platform, and towns for the way they vote. One of the main reasons that Baptists emerged against this top-heavy understanding of authority was that they valued the individual's experience of Christ. No one person can tell you the correct way to experience Jesus. Yet even with the Baptists individuals have emerged as well as institutions, which claim a great deal of authority concerning Christ. But standing behind the screen of someone else's interpretation is one safe way to make sense the new teaching that Christ offers.

## *Movement 3 – No Authority in Christianity*

Some of us go our separate ways. Imagine community of people in Capernaum standing around listening to Jesus, and wondering what to do with this new teaching and new authority. Some of them may look for strong leaders to explain and interpret Jesus' actions. But others may relay upon their own experience to follow the teachings and ideas of Christ. What feels best would probably be best to these people. Their experience is an authority when reading scripture, when listening to Jesus' words, and when living out their faith life. If they could no longer trust the scribes as an authority, how could they trust anyone else? So many scattered, following their own doctrinal, liturgical, and ecclesial winds.

This is not foreign to us today either. Many of us turn to our experience as an authority for our faith. If it feels good, if it feels right that it must be good and right. In the early 1800s churches sprouted up like

mushrooms because a group of people had a particular experience of Jesus that was different from everyone else's. These people freed themselves from the restrictions of an institution telling them what to do and how to understand this new teaching of Jesus. These people would not let anyone tell them that they were wrong or misguided concerning faith.

It is almost as if Jesus teaches and tells us to do whatever we wanted to do with his teaching. It is almost as if Jesus took a bottle of sand and let it go in the wind, as each individual Christian turns to his or her experience as the basis for understanding Christ. On the one hand there is a lot of freedom in such an approach to Christianity. On the other hand, there is a chaos and lack of unity. It is like the scene in the movie *Kindergarten Cop* when all of the children are running every way to each of their own whims and desires. Christianity would become that room of children with no structure or control. It is chaos as some advocate open marriages while others advocate celibacy. And the radicals like Pat Robertson would still emerge; spouting weak and sloppy theology for any audience willing to listen. You can almost hear the Catholics, Episcopalians and others on the side shouting, "See, this is why we look to tradition, order, and the authority of the church to keep things in line and focused on Christ." We hear the teachings of Christ, and many just run their separate ways, according to what we think is the way we want to go.

#### *Movement 4 – Christ is the Authority*

We all tend to forget that Christ is the only one who can speak for Christ and for God. It is natural that we look past Christ to others or ourselves when we hear his new teaching and authority. After all, it is different and shocking for those people in Capernaum. Their whole world-view had changed through the teachings of Christ, and it was hard to know what to do next. But we are challenged to stay with Jesus, and to listen to him. The scribe went to others to help understand God. I go to others, theologian, scholars, and great thinkers to help understand God and Christ. The different and new thing about Jesus is that he doesn't go to anyone else but is connected to God. Jesus brings to us the experience of the divine in a direct way that no one else can. So when we think of who to go to and how to understand the teachings of Jesus, we stay with Jesus as the source and the foundation and the authority of our faith.

What happens is all of our thoughts; questions and concerns about faith and the religious life are answered through Christ. We can wonder what it means to have a creating God and think about it through philosophical methods. We can look for scriptural warrant about God creating and try to understand those passages. We can listen to the stories of our past about the power and significance of a creating God. We can go to the mountaintop and experience the beauty of God's creation in an awesome and powerful way. But all of these will be limited and flawed without the revelation of Jesus Christ to complete the teaching. When we look at the relationship Christ has with creation, the relationship Christ has with God, and we listen to the teachings about the lilies and the birds, then we begin to truly and fully understand God as creator. Through Christ will things be made clear and known?

Or think about the divine love of God. We can explain it with theorems and proofs. We can talk about God's love of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob as it appears in scriptures, we can talk about our tradition's sharing of God's divine love, and we can even experience God's love. But all will fall short of a full revelation without Christ on the cross showing us the fullness, in an authorial way, the divine love of God. Christ is the authority, not the institution, not the experience, not reason, nor even scripture on its own. The new teaching of Christ opens up to us all of the faith and religious life we are called to live and experience. Christ is the only one who can truly and fully speak for God.

#### *Movement 5 – Soul Freedom with Christ*

This is risky and challenging; because we may not want to fully hear the good news of God that Christ has to offer. One friend of mine said, "You know you are idolatrizing when your God hates everyone you do." Relay on your own experience and everything will seem right and ok. But relay upon the God to challenge you

and test you, and push you, and you may be called to recognize that God loves and forgives all people, even the ones you hate. This is the call to discipleship and to commitment. There is a wonderful story about Clarence Jordan and his brother arguing about commitment. Clarence finally said to his brother, who was not willing to take a politically risky stance for the sake of Christ, that he was an admirer of Christ, but not a follower. An admirer of Christ will go to the cross, but a follower of Christ will go on the cross. An admirer of Christ will do what feels good, but a follower of Christ will go even to where it hurts.

I remember one day I was talking to one of the boiler repairmen about the church and he asked me, who influenced my preaching. It was a loaded question, for this individual wanted to know if I was more influenced by Charles Stanley or Jeremiah Wright. He wanted to know if I was influenced by Fosdick or Sprugon. He wanted to know if my understanding of the gospel was more in line with Martin Luther King Jr. or with Billy Graham. I looked at him and said, "My preaching is influenced by Jesus Christ." We don't look to an institution, nor an individual, nor our own experience but to Jesus Christ for the authority on the Kingdom of God. We don't follow one disciple or another, we don't follow one idea or another, and we follow Christ. In the Baptist movement we have the idea of soul freedom. In that idea we claim that each individual is responsible to working out his or her salvation with Christ. It is a responsibility because each one of you is responsible to ask yourself if you are really listening to Jesus or to what you want Jesus to say. Are you hearing Christ, or what you would like Christ to say? Have you ever heard the story of Roger Williams? He was established in the Boston colony. He was relatively comfortable, but he was listening to Christ, and heard the challenge to move away from the unjust treatment of Native Americans and the religious intolerance, which was being practiced. He was listening not to the community or to his own need for comfort, but to Jesus. Are you listening to Jesus? Is Jesus your authority? Are you willing to speak against the crowd if you need to? This is the freedom and the responsibility that we gain from our Soul Freedom, that you are called to listen to Jesus for yourself. I won't tell you what to do, nor would I expect the same from you. Instead we look to the cross and walk to it together.

### *Movement 6 – Community with Christ*

Together we walk, and together we look to the cross. Our challenge to follow Christ, our challenge to make the new teaching of Christ our authority is not something we are called or should do alone. You are responsible for your own relationship with Jesus, but the community is here to guide and help you along the way. Let this gathered body challenge your faith and your relationship with Christ. If you go to far astray, we will bring you back in. If we go to far astray, you will bring us back in. We are called to relay upon each other to keep each other focused on the cross. This is the tension of the Baptist movement that our relationship with Christ is shared in the church, and grows through the church. We can't let any authority, any institution or hierarchy tell us what is right or wrong, but we can't run off on our own and be Christians isolated from a community. We need each other in our faith. We need to hold each other accountable, challenging each other and calling each other to new heights. We listen to the minority of our faith, we listen to the majority of our faith and then we listen to Jesus in our own lives and go where we are led. This is the tension and the genus of the Baptist movement. Each of you is responsible for your own relationship with Christ, but we are responsible to share that relationship with each other. And if this is a church based upon honesty, charity and love our sharing will be honest, profound, and blessed by God.

Christ offers a new teaching that only Christ can explain. As a gathered people and as individuals we gather and listen and live that teaching in our lives.

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