
“Why Did Jesus Come to Earth?”

The most far-reaching event in the history of the world has to be the coming of Jesus, God’s Son, into the world in human flesh. Paul wrote that even though Jesus existed in the form of God, He did not regard this equality with God as something to be clung to at all costs, but He “emptied Himself, taking the form of a bondservant,” and was “made in the likeness of men” (Philippians 2:6, 7). According to John, “the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Someone has said, “He was just as much human as if He were not divine at all, and He was just as much divine as if He were not human at all.” So completely did Jesus identify with the human race in His incarnation that He was born as all humans are born (Luke 2:6), grew as all humans grow (Luke 2:40), was subject to all the sufferings to which all humans are heirs (Hebrews 5:8, 9), and lived in a body that could be affected by disease, deterioration, and death—a body that humans could even kill (Philippians 2:8, 9). He was thoroughly a man, and therefore was the Son of man; yet He was entirely divine, and therefore was the Son of God (Hebrews 2:14, 17, 18). He was the perfect fusion of humanity and deity into one personality.

This truth raises a deeply searching question: Why did Jesus come to earth the way He did? What was the purpose of His entering the human race, living among us, and dying on a cross? Why would the divine Son of God condescend to the extent of becoming wholly and actually man? The reason can be summarized like this: “He came to call out—by His ministry, death, and

resurrection—a people for His name.” Paul said that Jesus “gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds” (Titus 2:14). In other words, the result of His visit to this earth is the church. Jesus did not write a book, found a college, establish a physical family, or set up an endowment fund through a magnificent fortune that He amassed. The only tangible thing that His earthly ministry produced was the church. The only thing Jesus ever said He would build was the church (Matthew 16:18), and the only thing that Jesus laid the foundation for during His ministry was the church. Truly, then, the church is the creation of the earthly advent of Christ.

AFFIRMED BY THE GOSPELS

This truth is affirmed by the Gospels. Every Gospel Account points to and leads up to the church, the kingdom of heaven, that Jesus would establish on the first Pentecost following His death and resurrection.

As we study the life of Christ in the Gospels, we are struck by three truths about His ministry: (1) the mission He set out to accomplish, (2) the preparatory nature of His work, (3) and the incomplete character of His ministry.

First, the Gospels make it evident that Jesus did not intend to evangelize the world during His personal ministry. After choosing His apostles, He did not give them a worldwide commission for their preaching. He said to them, “Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 10:5, 6).

During His ministry, Jesus limited Himself to Palestine. He never branched out by going to other countries of the Roman world. The mission He sought to fulfill was accomplished by His preaching and teaching in a rather small area of the world. Had Jesus set out to evangelize the world during His personal ministry, undoubtedly He would have gone about His ministry an entirely different way, employing a different strategy and different methods.

Second, the Gospels clearly indicate that Jesus' life, works, and death were preparatory for something to come. He preached, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17). In the Sermon on the Mount, He taught His disciples to pray, "Thy kingdom come" (Matthew 6:10). He was careful to prevent the crowds from being overwhelmed by His miracles and rallying behind the idea of an earthly king and kingdom. He did not allow the multitudes of people to dictate His schedule or agenda. When He worked a miracle, He asked the recipient of the miracle to "tell no one" (Matthew 8:4). He chose twelve apostles and personally trained them, but it is apparent that He was training them for the work that they would do after His departure (John 14:19).

Third, the Gospels picture the ministry of Jesus as having a kind of incompleteness. Jesus did what His Father had sent Him to do; but at the end of His life, He prepared His apostles to expect other events and revelations following His death. He promised His apostles, "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you" (John 14:26). He also told them, "But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come" (John 16:13). After His resurrection and just before His ascension, Jesus commanded His apostles to wait in Jerusalem until they received power from on high. Following the reception of power, they were to preach repentance and remission of sins to all nations, starting in Jerusalem (Luke 24:46–49).

These characteristics of our Lord's ministry before and after His death boldly proclaim that Jesus' ministry on earth was that of bringing

together the essential elements for the establishment of His kingdom, the church. In Matthew 16:18 Jesus announced to His disciples the intention of His earthly work: "And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it."

CONFIRMED BY ACTS

Acts confirms the truth that Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection had behind them the controlling purpose of creating the church. The Gospels candidly announce the truth, and Acts clearly illustrates it.

Ten days after our Lord's ascension, the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the apostles on Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4). On this occasion the gospel of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus was preached for the first time; people were invited to respond to this gospel by faith, repentance, and baptism for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38; Luke 24:46, 47). Three thousand people accepted that invitation by receiving the Word which was preached and by being baptized (Acts 2:41). In this way, following Jesus' ministry as night follows day, the church of our Lord was born.

The remaining story of Acts is the story of the church in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and other parts of the Roman Empire. Whenever inspired preaching occurred in Acts, the hearers responded to that preaching by coming into the church in obedience to the gospel. Whenever a mission trip took place, as recorded in Acts, its purpose was to establish the church in new areas of the world. The three missionary trips of Paul in Acts left churches throughout the Roman Empire, from Jerusalem to Illyricum (Romans 15:19). No one can read Acts without being impressed with the understanding that the church is the outcome of Christ's earthly advent.

Once I heard someone say, "We must employ the same methods that Jesus employed in our task of evangelizing the world. We must each gather around us twelve men and train them for future work. Jesus showed us how to evangelize the world." Certainly, Jesus was perfect in everything He was and did, but we must observe that His mission during His ministry was not that of evangelizing the world—His mission was to lay the foundation for the church; it was to lay the foundation for evangelizing the world. In His

approach to His work, therefore, He employed methods suitable for the fulfillment of His distinctive mission.

Accordingly, we do not see in Acts that the apostles and other inspired men employed the same methods that our Lord used. They did not gather around them twelve men to train exactly as our Lord did. Through their preaching and teaching, the apostles and other inspired men brought people into the church. These new Christians were nurtured, trained, encouraged, and taught for service and evangelism *by the church*. Acts shows us the functioning of the church as the product of the earthly advent of Jesus.

REAFFIRMED BY THE EPISTLES

The New Testament epistles bring before us the application of the truth that the church is the natural fruition of Christ's earthly mission. The Gospels affirm this truth, Acts illustrates it, and the epistles apply it. The epistles show us how to respond to the life of Christ by being the church, His spiritual body.

The New Testament epistles were written to people who had chosen to come to Christ through faith and obedience. They lived at a time when the effect of Christ's life, death, and resurrection was in clear focus. They were led by inspired men regarding how they were to honor Jesus as Lord and what they were to do in response to His earthly advent. In every epistle, the followers of Christ are urged by inspired instruction to live and serve as Christ's spiritual body, the church. These epistles, when brought together, actually provide a "guidance manual" on how to be and live as the church of Christ in all kinds of circumstances and in different places.

We can draw several conclusions from the epistles regarding how we are to respond to Christ's earthly ministry. First, we submit to Jesus as Lord by entering His body through obedient faith. Paul likened the final act of this faith response to putting on, or being clothed with, Christ (Galatians 3:27). According to the epistles, no one has truly submitted to Jesus until he has entered His body, the church, through baptism that has been preceded by faith, repentance, and confession of Jesus as God's Son.

Second, we honor the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus by living and worshiping together as God's family in His spiritual body, the church.

Paul said, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). He further wrote, "For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another" (Romans 12:4, 5; see 1 Corinthians 12:25–27). When we fail to live and worship as God's family in the spiritual body of Christ's church, we detract from what Jesus came to accomplish and mar what Jesus died to establish.

Third, Jesus has called us to be His body, His church, and nothing more. The epistles never describe His people as being anything other than the body of Christ. According to the epistles, Jesus created only one way for us to follow Him, only one way to serve Him, only one way to receive His blood and the salvation He procured. That one way is faithfully living in this world as His spiritual body, His church.

CONCLUSION

The entire New Testament, then, joins together to teach that the church, the spiritual body of Christ, is the creation of Christ's ministry on earth. The Gospels affirm it by promising it, Acts confirms it by illustrating it, and the epistles reaffirm it by applying it to life.

Since the New Testament says that the only way for us to respond appropriately to Jesus as the divine Son of God—as the One who lived, died, and arose from the dead for our salvation—is to enter His church and then live and serve as faithful members of it, the question that follows is this: "Are we living as His body?"

When Jesus came to the end of His life on this earth, He could say, "Father, I have done what You have asked Me to do. I have fulfilled Your mission for Me." May it be that when we come to the close of life, we can say, to the extent of our abilities, "Lord, I have discovered from the Scriptures what You wanted me to be and do, and I have dedicated myself to this divine mission. I have sincerely tried to glorify You on the earth, and I have sought to live the mission that You gave to me."¹

Eddie Cloer

¹This lesson is a reprint from "What Does the Bible Teach?" *Truth for Today* (June 1994): 2.