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# CHRISTIANITY TODAY



||| A PRESBYTERIAN JOURNAL DEVOTED TO STATING, DEFENDING  
 AND FURTHERING THE GOSPEL IN THE MODERN WORLD |||

SAMUEL G. CRAIG, Editor

H. McALLISTER GRIFFITHS, Managing Editor

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## Christianity and External Authority

A GENERATION or two ago those calling themselves Christians were practically unanimous in holding that Christianity derived both its content and its sanction from external authority. Protestants and Roman Catholics differed as to the proximate seat of this authority—whether in the Bible or the Church—but they were wholly at one in their recognition of its existence. It is a historical error of the first magnitude to suppose that the Protestant doctrine of private judgment as advocated by our fathers carried with it a rejection of the idea of external authority in the sphere of religion.

Seventy-five years ago the rejection of external authority in religion was for the most part confined to those who were professedly antagonistic to Christianity. Today, however, such denial is an outstanding characteristic of multitudes of professing Christians, including many would-be leaders. We do not have to look outside the circle of the Presbyterian ministry to find those to whom the very idea of an external authority is anathema, notwithstanding the fact that without exception they have solemnly vowed that they believe that "the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice." How in view of this palpable contradiction they are able to retain a sense of intellectual honesty and moral integrity we do not profess to be able to explain.

Various causes have contributed to the bringing about of the existing situation. One of the most potent of these has been

the spread of modern evolutionary ideas. Where such ideas are dominant, all things are regarded as in a state of flux. There is nothing fixed or stable. Relativity belongs to the very essence of reality. If Evolutionism expresses the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, it needs no labored argument to prove that there is no such thing as an infallible authority in any sphere of life. In that case the existence of such an

authority is impossible in the very nature of things.

A closely related but deeper cause is that naturalism of thought and sentiment so characteristic of present-day thought, according to which the whole history of the world and man including religion and morality has come to pass without the operation of any supernatural factor. It is clear that in as far as we are naturalistic in thought and sentiment, we are precluded from the recognition of an external authority that speaks in terms of finality; for if there is such an authority it has a supernatural sanction. No doubt there may be a recognition of such external authority as the State, for instance, exercises where there is no recognition of the supernatural; but the existence of an external authority in any sphere of life that speaks in terms of finality is inextricably bound up with the reality of the supernatural as a factor in human life.

Other causes that have been potent are indicated when we speak of Rationalism and Mysticism. We mention these together because they are at one in finding the seat of authority within man himself. What is more, there is much to warrant the statement that the difference between Rationalists and Mystics is largely temperamental. "Warm up a rationalist and you have a mystic; cool down a mystic and you have a rationalist." Be this as it may, as belief in either Rationalism or Mysticism spreads belief in an external authority wanes.

### IN THIS ISSUE:

#### Editorial Notes and Comments

- The Denver Assembly..... 2
- Putting First Things First..... 3
- Dr. Machen's Denver Sermon..... 4
- What is an Evangelical?..... 4

- The Popularity of Jesus..... 5  
R. B. Kuiper

- Notes on Biblical Exposition..... 8  
J. G. Machen

- The 144th General Assembly of the  
Presbyterian Church, U. S. A..... 10  
H. McA. Griffiths

- The Fourth Montreat Assembly..... 18  
J. B. Morton

- The United Presbyterian Assembly.... 20  
A. G. MacLennan

- The 58th Canadian General  
Assembly..... 21

# The Popularity of Jesus

An address delivered at the Third Commencement of Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia

By the Rev. R. B. Kuiper, D.D.  
President of Calvin College

**I**N the heart of every minister of the gospel dwells a desire for popularity. It is wont to be especially strong in the case of the youthful preacher. Without either condemning or condoning this desire I purpose to consider the question, what are the faithful minister's chances of becoming popular.

A brief study of the popularity of Jesus may be expected to yield the answer.

That Jesus was exceedingly unpopular with the religious leaders of His day is a matter of common knowledge. Only occasionally did one of them do homage to Him. By and large, both the priestly party, the Sadducees, and the prophetic party, consisting of Scribes and Pharisees, evinced violent opposition to Him. Far though these stood apart one from the other generally, in their hatred of Jesus they were at one. Jesus and the machinery in control of the Jewish church were openly and flagrantly at odds with each other.

The Sadducees may be styled the Liberals of that day. On several scores they denied the supernatural. According to the early church fathers they rejected the greater part of the Old Testament as the inspired Word of God. They denied, so the New Testament tells us, both the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body. No wonder that we find them in frequent dispute with orthodox Jesus.

The Scribes and Pharisees, on the other hand, constituted the orthodox party in the church. But their orthodoxy was dead. They exclaimed, "Lord! Lord!" but did not the will of God. Under the show of offering long prayers in public, they devoured widows' houses. They resembled whited sepulchres—fair without, within full of dead men's bones.

Jesus in His passion for truth tore the cover from their lives, ripped the mask from their faces, and poured out upon them His undiluted woes.

By the way, the Pharisees were not altogether as orthodox as they pretended to be. Just as soon as orthodoxy dies it ceases being orthodoxy. Their legalism led them to suppose that law observance was meritorious and thus they denied that hall-mark of true-blue orthodoxy, the doctrine of salvation by grace.

Perhaps it is well to observe that His conflict with the leaders of the church, violent though it was, did not lead Jesus to cast overboard the institution of the church. It was His custom to attend the synagogue on Sabbath days. When He had cleansed a certain leper He sent him to the priest for examination according to the law. And in the same breath in which He warned the people not to do after the works of the Scribes He admonished them to heed their teaching. Jesus was not an ecclesiastical anarchist.

So far we have hardly touched upon our theme. To assert that Jesus was unpopular with the religious leaders of His day is to say next to nothing on our subject. The reason for this is obvious. Popularity may be defined as having favor with the people; the populus, if you please; the plebs, if you prefer. But they were not the people.

With the common people Jesus was for a long time exceedingly popular. Immense throngs were wont to follow Him. We read of four or five thousands. They came to Him from every quarter, even from Idumea, Decapolis, and the parts about Tyre. His enemies complained that the world was running after Him. When He had miraculously fed a multitude with a few loaves and a couple of fish they were ready to

crown Him king. On the last Sunday of His earthly stay His popularity reached its pinnacle. Seated on the colt of an ass He rode toward the royal city over the clothes of His admirers and branches of palms. The enthusiastic crowd was eager to lead Him triumphantly through the gate into the city of David and to place Him high on the throne of His illustrious sire. The earth must well nigh have been rent by the shout, "Hosanna! Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the kingdom that cometh, the kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!"

What accounts for Jesus' amazing popularity? Without an attempt at completeness several factors may be named.

His preaching had much to do with it. The people fairly hung on His lips when from them flowed the matchless parables, those wonderfully simple, yet unfathomably deep, tales of workaday life. They were captivated by His gracious manner, His simple delivery, devoid of every trace of artificiality. The note of authority that characterized His preaching satisfied them, dead-tired as they were of the negativistic preaching of the Scribes and their evasion by appeal to human authority of the fundamental questions of religion demanding clear-cut answers.

His readiness to help those in distress must have made him exceedingly popular. He traveled through the length and the breadth of the Jewish land doing nothing but good. He healed the sick, cast out demons, cleansed lepers, even made the dead to live. Such a man commanded adoration, almost worship. The people gave it Him.

How it must have pleased the common folk when the great Rabbi of Nazareth

on many occasions took sides with the despised, the scum of society, over against a self-appointed aristocracy. The fact that His retinue consisted largely of Galileans, with the smell of fish on their hands, and publicans, some of which may well have had the smell of liquor on their breath, must have drawn many to Him. The parable of Dives and Lazarus, no doubt, gained Him the plaudits of the poor.

Who can doubt that Jesus' sympathetic attitude toward sinners, not of the self-righteous type, but such as through weakness had sunk deep into the mire, won for Him the love of many? Anybody at all conscious of his own proneness to sin could hardly help loving Him who told the tale, so full of human interest as well as divine grace, of the prodigal son; who delivered from the hatred of her persecutors the woman caught in adultery; who spread out His hands compassionately to sinners laden with legalistic burdens too heavy to bear, and issued the sweet invitation, "Come unto Me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn of Me, for I am meek and lowly in heart, and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

Most important of all, it may not be forgotten that the Jews of Jesus' day were yearning to shake off the yoke of heathen Rome, were longing unspeakably for a king to arise among them who would smash this hated yoke, restore to Jewry independence, and place Jerusalem at the head of the nations. No doubt the people hoped that the wonder-working Rabbi of Nazareth might prove to be that deliverer. Their national hopes they staked on Him. That made Him a popular idol.

Came the time when Jesus' popularity began to wane. It happened in the synagogue at Capernaum. Just the previous day he had miraculously fed thousands and they had sought to make Him king by force. Now He told them sharply, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, ye have not

life in yourselves." Said they, "This is a hard saying. Who can hear it?" And many went back and walked no more with Him.

Came the time when Jesus' popularity collapsed. It happened in the last week of His ministry. On Sunday the multitude escorted Him as king into the city of David. On Friday the same multitude shrieked, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" Why the sudden and complete reversal? The answer is significant. Instead of king, Jesus had become a prisoner. Instead of royal purple, He wore the purple of mockery. Instead of a sparkling diadem, a crown of thorns pressed upon His temples. Instead of a sceptre of gold, there was given Him a reed. Instead of making the streets of the holy city run red with the blood of Romans, He permitted His own blood to be shed. Instead of a throne, He chose the cross. Then the people were through with Him. Now He was despised and rejected of men as no one else ever was.

The crucified Jesus is little more popular today than He was nineteen hundred years ago.

To be sure, superficially viewed this would not seem to be the case. Seldom, if ever, in the course of the centuries that have elapsed since His earthly sojourn has the Man of Nazareth been as popular as He is today. Modernists are vying with Fundamentalists in singing His praises. Missionaries tell us that there are heathen who have no respect for our occidental Christianity and yet are deeply in love with the person of Jesus. Mahatma Gandhi would be His disciple. Liberal Jewish Rabbis courageously break with tradition and express high admiration for the carpenter's Son. Bolshevik Russia, to be sure, has repudiated Him, but it is hardly an exaggeration to assert that the rest of the world adores Him.

But, I ask, who is this popular Jesus? And the answer comes, It is not Christ crucified. He is about as unpopular as ever. Some reject Him more boldly than do others. But, whether rudely or suavely, many, very many, who profess

great admiration for Jesus reject the Crucified One.

Says a recent biographer of Joseph Pulitzer: "As a symbol the Christian cross compares poorly with the crescent of Mohammed. There is no cross or blood in the teachings of Confucius or Buddha. A real Reformation would restore the living Christ, banish the cruel cross, and take for its guidance the shining star." There is Satan as a roaring lion.

More frequently his servants come in the guise of angels of light.

There are several theories of the atonement, known by high-sounding names, but there is only one adequate interpretation. It is the Scriptural view of the atonement. The Example Theory, the Moral Influence Theory, the Governmental Theory, the Mystical Theory, the Vicarious Repentance Theory—all these deny that the unswerving justice of God required that sin should be atoned for by death and that this atonement was effected by the substitutionary death of the Son of God on Calvary's tree. By that very denial the Christ crucified is denied.

Many modern teachers of religion place a disproportionate emphasis on Christ's prophetic office, and not a few of these completely ignore or even flatly deny His priestly work. The older liberals, as Renan and Strauss, adore His teaching as such. Several later liberals, Julicher, Harnack and Bousset, for instance, and their numerous satellites go a step farther and derive the virtue of His teaching from His person. It must be remembered, however, that the latter, as little as the former, ascribe Deity to Him. In consequence it may be seriously questioned whether their admiration of Jesus differs essentially from that of Mohammedans. It is certain that for His bloody sacrifice for sin they have no more use than do the followers of the false prophet.

There are those who would substitute for the old-time gospel a so-called social gospel. I would not be misunderstood. Far be it from me to deny that the gospel of Jesus Christ has social impli-

cations, to assert that the preacher has no business to apply it to social conditions. But when men substitute the salvation of society by Jesus' precept and example for the salvation of the individuals constituting society by His atoning death, then it is time that we demur. For then the Christ crucified is being rejected.

More subtle is the denial of Christ crucified implied in the present day fad of paralleling Christ's cross with the cross of mortal man. When a soldier dies for his country, when a mother lays down her life for her child, many do not hesitate to put them in a class with the vicariously dying Jesus. It grieves me exceedingly to have to remark that some of our most popular hymns have not escaped this baneful error. To illustrate:

"On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross,  
The emblem of suffering and shame;  
And I love that old cross where the dearest and best  
For a world of lost sinners was slain."

Good so far, splendid even! But then comes the refrain, which is saddening indeed:

"So I'll cherish the old rugged cross  
Till my trophies at last I lay down;  
I will cling to the old rugged cross,  
And exchange it some day for a crown."

What? Exchange what cross for a crown? Your own or Christ's? What confusion of thought! What sinful confusion! Christ's cross is unique. It represents the divine curse, the wrath of God due to sinful mankind but poured out on God's own Son as substitute. Whoever detracts in the least from the uniqueness of that cross, in principle denies the Crucified One.

Exceedingly subtle is that denial of the Christ crucified which is implied in the tendency on the part of supposedly orthodox preachers to stress Christ's resurrection at the expense of His death. They tell us to center our attention more on the living Jesus, less on the dying. A false antithesis! A dangerously false antithesis! The two are inseparable, and one may never be made to give way for the other.

Yes, Jesus is popular as once He was

in Palestine. But the dying Jesus, the crucified Jesus, is almost as unpopular as He was then and there.

What accounts for the unpopularity of the crucified Christ? A few suggestions are in order.

The cross makes man appear awfully guilty. It tells him something like this: "Jesus is hanging there in thy stead. Thou, O sinner, art worthy of death, the accursed death of crucifixion. Thou hast deserved it that God should forsake thee and plunge thee into everlasting and outer darkness. Thou hast merited hell." How humiliating!

The cross makes man appear woefully weak. It says to him: "Thou canst not save thyself. That thou mightest be saved God had to move heaven and earth. The very Son of God had to come down from heaven. He had to grapple unto death with Satan in order to release thee from his hold. To deliver thee from death, the penalty of sin, He had Himself to enter upon death's dark domain and to emerge triumphantly. He alone the Almighty Son of God, can save thee." How humiliating!

The natural man will have nothing of this. He turns from the cross and goats:

"It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishment the scroll;  
I am the master of my fate,  
I am the captain of my soul."

Lady Macbeth has become responsible for a couple of murders. Her conscience troubles her. She dreams of her misdeeds. She talks and walks in her dreams. One night while thus engaged she rubs her hands as if she were washing them. Then she says, "Yet here's a spot." A little later she calls, "Out, damned spot! Out, I say!" Finally she shrieks, "Here's the smell of blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand—oh—oh—oh!" Declares the gospel of the crucified Christ: "Thou, Oh sinner, hast a spot of blood in thy hand, and all the perfumes of all the good works thou mayest do, of all the noble traits that may grace thy character, of all the self-denial thou mayest practice, will not sweeten that hand. The only thing in all the universe

of God that will do it is the blood of the crucified Son of God."

What are the faithful minister's chances for popularity? we ask again. And now we are prepared to give an answer. Let the minister imitate the greatest Preacher of all time so far as possible. Let him preach simply, beautifully, authoritatively. Such is his duty. Let him ever stand ready to aid those in distress. It is his privilege. Let him be sympathetic toward the under-dog. It is noble. Let him tenderly lift up fallen sinners. It is his honor. Then he will gain a measure of popularity, mayhap a large measure. But let him not neglect to preach the gospel of the crucified Christ. Then he will soon know what the Master meant when He said, "The disciple is not greater than his Lord; if they hated Me they will also hate you." For there is no more unpopular message than this. It is a gospel not at all after the natural man. It goes against his grain as nothing else does. The faithful minister is bound to share in the unpopularity of his message.

My wish for these seminary graduates is that they may become unpopular by preaching the unpopular gospel of Christ crucified.

Will they have no friends at all? Yes, possibly many; likely few; certainly some; and these some, warm. They will be penitent publicans, prodigal sons who have learned to abhor themselves, sinful women to whom much has been forgiven, Marys of Magdala out of whom seven demons have been cast, malefactors who pray as they die, and virtuous folk who realize that by nature they are not a whit better than these others,—all such as can sing from the heart:

"Upon that cross of Jesus  
Mine eye at times can see  
The very dying form of One  
Who suffered there for me;  
And from my smitten heart with tears  
Two wonders I confess:  
The wonders of his glorious love  
And my own worthlessness."

Better than that, they will enjoy the blessed friendship of Him who declared, "Ye are My friends if ye do whatsoever I command: to preach the gospel of His cross.