
Study Questions for William C. Placher's *Jesus the Savior*

Developed by John C. Van Nuys
Pastor, Wabash Avenue Presbyterian Church
Crawfordsville, Indiana

Preface

by William C. Placher

The Wabash Avenue Presbyterian Church is my home church; I'm an elder in the congregation. Adult Sunday School classes there have "tested out" a good bit of my work, going back to the manuscript of my first book, *A History of Christian Theology*. It is a great joy to me that the current pastor is John Van Nuys, a former student of mine who went on after his undergraduate work at Wabash to receive his M.Div. at Vanderbilt and his D.Min. from Wesley Theological Seminary. In addition to his many other gifts, John is a wonderful teacher and discussion leader.

I happened to be on sabbatical when my most recent book, *Jesus the Savior*, came out, so this time I couldn't lead discussions about it myself. I was pleased when John offered to lead them over a period of four weeks. What follows are the study questions he developed for those sessions. They led to lively discussions. Reading the whole book in four weeks moves quickly, but I think these questions would facilitate good discussion in groups that took things more slowly or read only parts of the book. Since the group that met here consisted of my friends and neighbors, John naturally called me "Bill" all the way through, and we agreed not to change that informal approach.

1

Incarnation

One of Bill's assumptions is that the core of Christian teaching has correctly understood Jesus even though the New Testament is not 100 percent historically accurate. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this beginning premise?

Regarding this section on the incarnation, Bill's summary statement is: "In the incarnation, Jesus revealed God's identity and transformed what it meant and ever after would mean to be human by uniting humanity with divinity" (p. 7). Is this what the incarnation really accomplished? If so, what are the implications of that accomplishment? If not, what exactly did the incarnation accomplish?

Bill says, "Christian faith holds that, if we know who Jesus really is, we will believe that he has saved us, and we will want to follow him" (p. 9). Is that true? If it is, why aren't Christians that much different from everyone else? What keeps us from truly following?

According to Bill, "If Jesus is divine, then learning about Jesus shows us who God is" (p. 15). What is your primary image/understanding of God? Is it Jesus? Or is Jesus separate from your understanding of who God is? To which person of the Trinity do you primarily pray? Some people find that Jesus is not the center of their devotional life; why do you think that is so?

Bill claims that Christ reveals God as Mystery and Reckless Love. Do you agree? Or are there other primary things that you feel Christ reveals instead?

Bill states (p. 43) that Christ's ". . . 'masculinity,' in any stereotyped sense of the word, does not form a central element of his character" (as with Samson or Abraham). Do you agree? Is the fact that Jesus was male problematic?

Is the Trinity a comfort or problem (or both) to you?

Bill believes that Jesus did not know everything. When pondering whether Jesus knew that he was the Word of God incarnate, Bill says: yes and no. What do you think?

Bill's first section on the incarnation really seems to emphasize (following Irenaeus's emphasis on recapitulation) that Christ redefines what it means to be human by recapitulating the story of human life: "By uniting humanity with the divine, Christ changes

what it is to be human" (p. 46). "The humanity in each of us is united with divinity in Christ." Do you agree?

How does what Bill says about abortion strike you? Why do you think that he brought up this topic?

How does Bill's treatment of the Christmas stories enlarge/challenge your understanding of those stories?

What was one thing you read or heard in this discussion that most intrigues/bothers/or encourages you?

What is your favorite Gospel story and why?

Bill says: “I have no doubt that many of those [Gospel] stories are altered in detail, simplified, or sometimes just invented, but they nonetheless show us the kinds of things Jesus did, the sorts of things he taught, and, in these and other ways, the human being he was” (p. 61). Do you agree with Bill’s statement? Does it weaken your faith, strengthen it, or both?

According to Bill, “The very form of [Mark’s] story is . . . a challenge to the dominant standards, in his society and ours, of what is valuable” (p. 62). How so?

Regarding the ministry of Jesus, Bill will discuss the following aspects:

1. Jesus in relation to Hebrew prophetic tradition
2. Jesus’ message regarding the reign of God
3. Jesus’ identity as messenger of that message
4. Jesus’ controversies regarding the implications of his message/identity as messenger
5. Issues of inclusion then/issues of inclusion now: homosexuality
6. Implications for preaching

Bill places Jesus within the Hebrew prophetic tradition. How was Jesus like a prophet? (See page 69.)

In chapter 8, Bill notes that Jesus’ immediate historical context was “apocalyptic.” What were the basic characteristics of the apocalyptic worldview?

The major parties within the Judaism of Jesus’ time included:

Sadducees (social engagement: temple focus—ritual purity)

Pharisees (social engagement: people focus—moral purity)

Zealots (social engagement: revolution)

Essenes (social withdrawal: prayer and thereby revolution)

How were Jesus' teachings like and unlike their views?

The Gospels speak of the reign or kingdom of God as public event (Mark 13) and inner transformation (Luke 17). How are those two pictures different?

Some of Jesus' parables use the image of a seed to talk about the reign or kingdom. What are the implications of that image?

Jesus talks about the reign or kingdom as nonviolent and inclusive. What are the implications of those characteristics?

The kingdom of God is central in Jesus' message. Is the kingdom of God central to your faith? Central to the faith and practice of our church? Why or why not?

Bill says that "Jesus' account of God's abundant love has implications for our interactions with others" (p. 79). How so? What are the implications?

Bill believes that ". . . truly hearing [the] good news will compel radical changes in one's life" (p. 79). If this is so, what changes can we anticipate? Why aren't we that different from secular people?

What is agape?

Bill asks: "What could it look like to anticipate, in whatever small ways, the reign of God?" (p. 82). What are signs that we are or are not doing that as a church?

In chapter 9, "Messenger: Who Do You Say That I Am?" Bill states: "What you believe about the messenger, how you respond to *him*, is a key part of your response to the message itself" (p. 84). How so?

Bill says that "in the Gospel stories people encounter God in Jesus" (p. 85). How so? If this is true, who is the God revealed in Jesus? What are God's "personality traits"? Habits? Dislikes?

Are the miracles of Jesus a problem for you as a person of faith? Or are they a comfort?

What did Augustine mean by "miracles"? (p. 88). Is that how you interpret Jesus' miracles?

Bill puts Jesus' resurrection in a category different from the other miracles. Why does he do that? Do you agree?

Bill claims that Jesus' miracles had a social as well as a medical function—they served to welcome outsiders into an inclusive community. Is that an important feature?

In chapter 10, “Controversies,” Bill says that “most people didn’t join [Jesus]” (p. 91). Why do you think that was so then? Do you think it’s still true? Why or why not?

Bill says that Jesus “seems to challenge everything” and that “following Jesus will involve scandal” (p. 94). Do you agree or disagree?

In chapter 11, “Homosexuality,” Bill outlines the forms of homosexuality prevalent in Paul’s day. Bill goes on to say that Paul condemned what he saw (p. 99), but asks “Would very different forms of homosexual activity have seemed wrong in the same way to Paul?” (p. 100). What do you think? In what ways do you agree or disagree with Bill’s arguments or conclusions in chapter 11?

In chapter 12, Bill discusses preaching as a continuation of Jesus’ ministry and message. How does Bill define good preaching? How do you define good preaching?

Which scripture passage or story of Holy Week, particularly the time from Palm Sunday through Good Friday, speaks most to you and why?

Bill points out in his opening chapter to this section that the cross is seen by some as problematic—a Wrathful Father sentencing an innocent Child to death in a kind of divine child abuse, legitimating and thereby perpetuating innocent suffering (e.g., a battered spouse being “Christlike”). Do you agree that these issues are problematic? Why or why not?

Bill says that as Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a foal “he has nothing to do with violence, but in his own way he is going to war” (p. 116). How so?

Bill raises the issue: “Are the [passion] narratives as we have them necessarily anti-Semitic?” (p. 119). How are they or how are they not?

Bill speaks of the Lord’s Supper as combining hope, memory, and presence. How so?

Every Sunday in the Apostles’ Creed we recite, “He descended into hell.” Bill talks about the different meanings that phrase has had—a triumphant rescue mission to Hell, Christ’s torments before he died (Calvin), or Christ’s post-death solidarity with those who have rejected God (von Balthasar). What does the phrase mean to you?

Bill’s thesis statement for this section is: “On the cross, Jesus suffers in a way that can help other sufferers know they are not alone, reconciles us to God, and redeems us from the powers of evil” (p. 7). Why do you think the Bible contains not one, but several explanations of the cross?

What do you make of Bill’s chapter on prisons? Where do you agree or disagree with him? Could/should a congregation like ours undertake some prison ministry? If so, what?

The notes that follow summarize the three theologies of the cross Bill discusses. What seems to you the most important idea for each? What is the problem for which each offers a solution? Which speaks most powerfully to you? Why?

Three theologies of the cross

Solidarity

7 “Jesus suffers in a way that can help other sufferers know that they are not alone.”

128 “Christ saves us simply by being God with us.”
“The cross represents the culmination of the incarnation.”

129 “the unconditional identification of God with the victim”

135 “nothing objective happens in God or in our relation with God”

Peter Abelard: “Seeing how much God loves us inspires us to love God in return.”

John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

Reconciliation

Priest and sacrifice

Holiness

(Anti-matter)

Mediator/expiation

Sinfulness

(Matter)

134 “The central purpose of the sacrifice is not to ‘change God’s mind’ but to purify a space in the human world so that God can be present there.”

134 “God loves. But God is holy. And it is the nature of holiness to be incompatible with sin or impurity.”

135 “a purification that closes the gap between us and God”

136 “Sin simply *cannot endure* to be in the presence of God, and therefore something has to be done before sinners can enter God’s presence.”

Anselm: “Honor—restoration must be made for our sin, but we already owe God everything, and cannot give more than everything. Therefore God must make up the requisite deficiency. But the restoration of the deficiency must come from human source. Therefore the only one who can restore the deficiency must be the One who is both God and human.”

Atonement (making us one with God)

7 “Jesus suffers in a way that . . . reconciles us to God.”

John 1:29 “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”

2 Corinthians 5:17–19 “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.”

Colossians 1:20 “Through [Christ] God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.”

138 “in Christ God healed the relationship that human sin had betrayed.”

140 God doesn’t need to be reconciled to us. God always loves. It is we who need to be reconciled to God.

141 “Christ stands with us in our place of sin, and therefore it is no longer a place separated from God.”

141 “‘wrath’ here not referring to an emotional reaction on the part of God, but functioning as the only way to describe the broken relationship from God’s side.”

141 “Reconciliation, then, is not about how Christ’s suffering appeases an angry Father. Our suffering has cut us off from God,

and we can experience God's love only as anger. God comes to be with us in the place of sin, as the way to bridge the abyss that lay between us, so that we can be in loving relation with God again. But coming into the place of sin is a painful business that costs a heavy price. It is a price that God, in love, is willing to pay."

Redemption

7 "Jesus suffers in a way that . . . redeems us from the powers of evil."

Redeem/ransom: Latin: to buy back

Types of redemption in ancient world:

- 1 Ransom paid to a slave master to buy back or obtain release from consequences of your own wrongdoing
- 2 Restitution paid as penalty to your victim

Regarding Jesus as our Redeemer:

- 1 Jesus volunteered to take our place.

1 Peter 1:18-19 "You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish."

Mark 10:45 "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

1 Timothy 2:6 "[Christ Jesus] gave himself a ransom for all."

- 2 Jesus as ransom for the consequences of all human sin

Revelation 5:10 Christ by his blood ransomed for God saints from all humanity

1 Corinthians 15:22 “As all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.”

3 Redemption from cosmic forces of evil

Luther: shift from replacement victim to transformative victim/combatant who conquers (not with evil for evil, but through love)
Also “deceiving the devil”; the bait and hook

Galatians 3:13 “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.”

4

Resurrection

Bill says: “One of my assumptions in this book has been that, while trying to understand the Bible sometimes appropriately raises the historical question, ‘What really happened?’ it is best to begin by reading biblical stories simply as stories, and see what they intend to convey about the identity of God or of Jesus” (p. 177). Has this premise worked well for you—or for us in this discussion? When might that premise not work?

Bill claims that the resurrection offers hope that transcends death: “To the powers and principalities that threaten us, even with death, we can reply that Jesus survived the worst they can do, and so can we” (p. 160). What are the implications of this claim?

According to Bill, what was the primary reason some Jews came to believe in the resurrection?

What were various beliefs Jews held in Jesus’ time concerning resurrection? Did everyone believe in resurrection? Who would be resurrected? What would resurrection be like?

Hebrew definition: humans can live with only a body
(resurrected body)

Human = body + spirit (cannot have one without the other)

Greek definition: soul is immortal, impervious to death
(immortal soul)

Natural immortality

Therefore there were multiple meanings, Bill says, two thousand years ago to the message “Jesus is raised from the dead.” However, those who believed Jesus had been raised would have concluded:

1. “If God had raised him, Jesus must have been who he said he was” (p. 164).
2. The general expectation was for a general resurrection at the end of time. Therefore an individual resurrection in the midst of time = a surprise that “suggested a relation between Jesus’ life and death and the end of history and God’s final judgment” (p. 164).

3. Confirmation of God's justice and power. God will have the last word. Jesus is that last word.

Is that different from what you believe?

Bill says that Christians need to make certain affirmations regarding Jesus' resurrection. What does Bill believe we need to reject?

At the same time, Bill claims that the biblical texts invite caution and notes that the resurrection accounts vary widely. He outlines some basic issues on page 168. Which of these do you agree with and which do you take issue with?

According to Bill, "believing in Jesus' resurrection means wanting to follow him. Those who believed they had encountered the risen Jesus had their lives transformed" (p. 168). How so? What are the implications for us?

Bill says that when our minds and hearts have been captured by the Jesus we meet [then] we will be persuaded . . . that the resurrection narratives point . . . to the reality that after his death he yet lived" (p. 170). How so?

In chapter 22, Bill explains that we cannot separate the question "What happened?" from the question "What does it mean?" He says that the "resurrection offers a radically new perspective on how we live, because it offers hope for what will happen to us after our deaths" (p. 171). What does that mean?

Bill says (p. 172) ". . . if no resurrection were to take place, the nature of human beings as human beings would not continue." Explain.

Bill states that "God made our bodies, and they are therefore good—not prisons to be escaped, but essential to who we are. To deny their goodness not only damages people psychologically but betrays the teaching of Bible and early church" (p. 172). What implications does this statement have for today? For such issues as anorexia/bulimia, body image, youth emphasis of our culture, sex as dirty?

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:50–53: "What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality."

Earlier Paul had stated that our present body and resurrected body are as different as a grain of wheat and a sheaf of headed grain—a death, a transformation, the same, but completely different (1 Cor. 15:35–41).

Do such passages help you understand the meaning of resurrection?

Bill says eternity is not endless time, but a qualitatively different kind of time. He goes on to explore the difference by examining how we experience time, saying that mostly we experience time anxiously. He explains “God lives in eternity. In this life, we catch glimpses of [eternity]. In the mystic’s vision, the focus of the artist or athlete, or the passion of love, we fleetingly experience a different kind of temporality than our normal sense of things—but only fleetingly” (p. 175). What experiences have you had like this?

According to Gregory of Nyssa, “After the resurrection, ‘a kind of all-inclusive human being will come into being so that nothing of the resurrected person will be missing in the risen person, the newly-born, the infant, the child, the adolescent, the adult, the parent, the old person, and all the stages in between’—bodily but eternal. Our hope, as Augustine wrote, is ‘not the escape from any kind of body but the possession of an imperishable body,’ and an imperishable body is not one that goes through time as we do without ever stopping, but a body living in the kind of time called eternity” (p. 176). In God nothing is lost. Discuss what this means to you.

Bill discusses the resurrection appearances in the gospels (i.e., Emmaus and by the Sea of Galilee), noting the stories’ emphasis that in reading Scripture and sharing Communion, we encounter Jesus—that our ability to share this experience is open and active through Word and sacrament. What are the implications of this biblical claim for us today?

Bill says, “One cannot tell stories about the risen Jesus without them becoming also stories about how to follow him” (p. 180). What are the implications for our faith that we largely do not tell others about Jesus? In what ways might we change?

Bill claims (p. 182) that following Jesus is not something people do on their own. It involves joining the community of Jesus (the church). Baptism is the way one joins. (In Greek, it means “to dip” or “to plunge.”) He says “Baptism washes away sin and moves the one baptized through a symbolic death to new life” (p. 185). “In baptism, Christians share Christ’s resurrection. It also involves joining a community: through baptism we become part of the church,

united not only to Christ but also to all who are also united to Christ” (p. 185). Is this your understanding of baptism?

He then goes on to discuss infant baptism. What are the reasons Bill gives in support of infant baptism? Do they persuade you?

Bill quotes Aquinas who points to the unbaptized thief who Jesus said would be with him today in paradise. So why bother? What does Bill say? What do you say?

In his last chapter, Bill looks at Christ as monarch, the ethical issues surrounding war, and Christ after his resurrection. Bill believes that the resurrection is not the end of the story and quotes the Apostles' Creed: the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead. How does Bill define the meaning of the ascension?

Bill then talks about Christ being seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. What does that mean?

1 John 2:1–2 “My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but for the sins of the whole world.”

Hebrews 4:15–16 “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

What kind of power does Bill say Christ has (p.190)?

Therefore Bill says that all who lead should model themselves accordingly. He talks about kingship in ancient Israel and the relationship between Caesar and Christ. Bill claims “Nations as we know them rest on blood . . . Christians therefore can never be unquestioning loyal citizens of any state” (p. 194). He refers to Philippians 3:19-20, which says that those who do not fully follow Christ: “Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame . . . but our citizenship is in heaven . . .” Comment on this passage.

Bill talks about the relationship between Christians and violence. He says that the earliest Christians were pacifists; that that ideal has not entirely disappeared, but since those first centuries, pacifism now is a minority view. Bill raises the issue of opposing tyrants like Hitler and defending ourselves, yet he cautions that these are tricky issues. Why? What conclusions do you reach?

Bill mentions one attendee at a conference who said that the United States should go into Kosovo, but unarmed with our civic and religious leaders leading us. Would that approach win the war on terrorism? What is the cost of taking that approach? Of not taking that approach?

Bill advocates nonviolent social engagement. How could this be done today?

Some Concluding Questions

5

From reading *Jesus the Savior*, what new understandings regarding Jesus have you gained? Are these comforting or challenging or both? What are the implications of these new understandings for you in your daily faith? What are the implications of these new understandings for your congregation in its communal faith?

After reading Bill's book, which aspects of Jesus' life, person, and ministry are more vivid/relevant/clear to you now? In what ways could the church either through its worship or its service make the life of Jesus more accessible/relevant to its members, to non-believers, to the wider community, to the world?

In addition to new understandings gained about Jesus, what questions do you have regarding Jesus that still remain? In what ways could you go about finding answers to those questions? If you could ask Bill a question, what would it be? If you could ask Jesus a question, what would that be?

What is the biggest insight/challenge/question/confirmation that you take away from *Jesus the Savior*?

In addition to talking about Jesus, Bill also addresses several current social issues. What other current issues came to mind as you read this book? What approaches to and/or solutions for these issues does this book suggest?

In your reading of Bill's book, which quotes/Bible passages/stories/illustrations especially stood out for you? Why? Has reading Bill's book changed your thinking about Jesus? If so, how has this changed your relationship with Jesus? In turn, how has this new relationship with Jesus changed your relationship with yourself, your church, your neighbors, the world, and God?