

**OPENING:**

Dr. Phil, the famous television show host and psychologist, was once asked: “If you could interview anyone in the world, past or present, who would it be?”

Dr. Phil answered “Jesus Christ.”

He went on to say: “I would really like to have a conversation with him about the *meaning of life*. I would ask Jesus the question: ‘What do I need to do from this day forward?’”<sup>1</sup>

Now, your mind should have already started churning: someone DID ask that sort of question of Jesus and it did not go very well.<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Phil is an easy target, a media-hyped celebrity with soft credentials.

My late grandmother once referred to him as:

“That bald man on TV who is always trying to tell you how to live your life.”

But Jesus’ interviewers in the Gospels are no less clumsy, no less bumbling and ineffective—with attacks on Jesus that are relentless, but easily repelled.

It reminds me of those action movies where the hero’s enemies encircle him/her only to be dispatched one by one in stunning fashion, until the hero emerges from the scrum, unharmed and unscathed, his enemies vanquished on the ground.<sup>3</sup>

That’s what Jesus does here to the chief priest and elders (and what I guess he would do to Dr. Phil) and what he will next do to the Pharisees, and the Sadducees, and then to the Roman authorities.

Jesus does that, he wins *arguments*, throughout the Gospels, that is, until the very end.

So Jesus would make a frustrating interviewee on the *Dr. Phil* show because Jesus would run circles around him.

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<sup>1</sup> Nicole Sawyer, “Dr. Phil: 8 Things You Didn’t Know About TV Host Phil McGraw” *ABC News* (May 28, 2015).  
<https://abcnews.go.com/Lifestyle/dr-phil-things-tv-host-phil-mcgraw/story?id=31369105>

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 19.16 (and parallels).

<sup>3</sup> Gene R. Smillie, “Jesus’ Response to the Question of His Authority in Matthew 21,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162 (October-December 2005), 462.

Jesus would keep asking questions, telling these enigmatic stories, and he might even try to convince Dr. Phil to go sell all his possessions.<sup>4</sup>

## **GOSPEL:**

In our Gospel reading, the elders ask Jesus: “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”<sup>5</sup> They are asking Jesus to “show his credentials” and are intending to embarrass and entrap him.

Jesus wiggles out of it, or seems to, by asking another question and then offering a parable that indicts his questioners.

They then skulk away, as another group approaches.

Jesus is skilled at this type of debate, the very type that the experts pride themselves on.

But he has a weird way of demonstrating it: constantly misdirecting, backing down, asking a different question, telling strange stories, and, sometimes, remaining silent.

Rarely does he just answer the question straight-up.

Most frustratingly, during the interrogation by Pontius Pilate, he just says: “you say so.”

And, elsewhere, Jesus is achingly silent when you want him to speak up.<sup>6</sup>

And so, he actually is not that great of a traditional debater, or he just does not seem too interested in the result.

Interacting with Jesus is like talking with the Court Jester, the Holy Fool, from Medieval times, where his antics confuse and perplex the audience.

In the end, Jesus is not interested in the ‘meaning of life’, he is interested people’s faith in him. Jesus is ultimately not interested in our arguments or our plans for self-improvement or our resumé’s.

What he wants is our very lives, not an intellectual bridgehead to meet us halfway.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Campbell, “Homiletical Perspective” in Bartlett, David Lyon, and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. 2008. *Feasting on the Word*. (Year A, Volume 4). Louisville: Westminster John Knox. 117.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 21.21

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 26.63, 27.11

<sup>7</sup> Campbell, 119, 121.

## **APOLOGETICS**

That's a useful reminder in our own contentious society, in our evidence-driven, proof-seeking culture.

At seminary, they were keen on teaching how to communicate the faith in *that* type of society. The fancy term for it is “apologetics” and it means “the art of the verbal/written defense of Christianity against its opponents.”<sup>8</sup>

Apologetics has a long history in the church, but with apologies to Thomas Aquinas and C.S. Lewis and others (who have forgotten more about this subject than I will ever know), I am not sure how effective any of it was or has been.

The simple way of proving that is just thinking about how many people have ever been argued, have ever been reasoned, ever been intellectually debated into faith and into belief.

I'd be interested in your own experiences with that sort of thing, my sense is that often goes in the other direction, that people have been argued right out the church doors when it comes to Apologetics.

## **JESUS' AUTHORITY:**

So, when asked about his authority/ his credentials, Jesus does not fall into the trap of trying to explain how he got here and why he belongs. His authority is based on *who* he is, not what he can *prove* himself to be.

For, as Stanley Hauerwas writes: “If one needs a standard of truth to insure that Jesus is the Messiah, then one ought to worship that standard of truth, not Jesus.”<sup>9</sup>

Pilate asks: “What is truth? and Jesus just sits there; “(he) does not reach out to convince us; he simply stands there in... (all his authority) and dares us to believe.”<sup>10</sup>

So, likewise, our task is a descriptive one, not a deductive one.<sup>11</sup> Our task is demonstrating how our belief in the risen Christ has turned our lives upside down.

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<sup>8</sup> Richardson, Alan, and John Bowden, eds. 1983. *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*. Philadelphia: Westminster. 31

<sup>9</sup> Hauerwas, Stanley. 2015. *Matthew*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos. 185.

<sup>10</sup> Capon, Robert Farrar. 2002. *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*. Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 443

<sup>11</sup> Macquarrie, John. 2nd ed. 1977. *Principles of Christian Theology*. New York: Scribner's. 56.

Our task is describing via our actions (and maybe words sometimes) what our experience of Jesus means to us.

Maybe it's as simple the line from the folk hymn: "They will know we are Christians by our love." Where we are living our life in a way that people can't mistake it for anything other than following in Christ's footsteps.

That's the apologetic.

## **INCARNATION:**

Now, that's really hard, it's easier to argue around the edges from a theoretical standpoint. And there is a certain degree of irony of me standing up here, in some way/ shape/ or form arguing about how one does not get argued into a life of faith.

But, deep down inside, I think even the elders knew the answer to their question about Jesus' authority, because they had seen it with their very eyes: they had seen Jesus healing the sick and giving sight to the blind. They had heard about him Feeding the 5000 they had seen him teaching with the *authority* that threatened theirs.

They were going to get him on the petty charge of blasphemy because it is only in that small area of argumentation that they could be on a level playing field with Jesus.

## **CONCLUSION:**

I will end with a note of realism because again, a sermon that says "Just be like Jesus, be Christ's hands and feet in the world (meanwhile, go easy on the arguing)." That's a tall order for us this Sunday,

The Good News is that, as always, Jesus is one step ahead recognizing that difficulty.

Jesus offers a parable of two sons, where the 1<sup>st</sup> son says "No" and then say "yes." He could tell a story like that, with authority, because he lived it and experienced it. Jesus knew about being the 1st son because he would say in the Garden:

"Father if it be possible, let this cup pass from me."

Even Jesus said no, before he said yes. He tried to argue his way... but then he submitted himself to God's authority and lived out his death in a way that we are called to follow and experience ourselves.....<sup>12</sup> **AMEN**

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<sup>12</sup> Susan Pendleton Jones, "The Obedient Son" *Christian Century* (September 8-15, 1999), 849.