

## Chapter Sixteen

### The Originality of His Preaching

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The question of Jesus' originality did not arise among his contemporaries. It does not occur in the records of his ministry. Modern scholars have sought to discover evidence to prove that this term does not belong to Jesus, and yet he will continue to impress the world with his incomparable greatness. Originality is a term of degrees rather than of kind. Absolute originality would mean isolation from the thought of the past and the contact of the present. The mountain arises out of the plain to which it is joined and by which it is measured.

Transcendence may become a synonym for originality. In this sense the preaching of Jesus was supremely original. No other preacher or teacher has at all approached his greatness. He did not need to assert his originality according to our modern methods, but he fully realized that his work of preaching and healing could not be classed with the service of any other person. Without reflecting upon others one can affirm the preeminence of the Nazarene in his ministry.

#### I. Originality and Environment

1. Heredity.—Jesus was the child of culture. Upon him focalized the previous forces of his ancestral and national education. He received the ordinary inheritance of the Hebrew boy whose incipient conscious mental life had been fixed by the culture and environments of his race. The larger forces of the world's thoughts and deeds had so played over Palestine as to give a definite type to the intellectual life of the boy, whose inclinations turned toward pious pursuits. Jesus had his initial contact with the world determined for him. He was the child of the centuries. Whatever heredity could bring to him he accepted, for he was essentially joined to the blood of his ancestry through his mother. The typical inheritance came to him.

But Jesus was far more than the product of heredity. His incarnation as a son of Israel ordained his Israelitish culture, while his transcendence over his contemporaries can find no adequate explanation except in originality. He was all that any Hebrew boy could be, but he was also what no other could be. After all possible recognition is given to heredity and its power, there yet remains the specialty of ministry and character to explain.

He conserved in his preaching every worthy element of his Hebrew culture and went far beyond what these might have prophesied. Joined to the past, moved by the present, he determined the future modes of religious thought and service. His exaltation above other men wins for him the glory of originality. To become the Son of man Jesus became the child of culture; to fulfill a Saviorhood for sinners and to empower his ministry to make effective such a mission, his life had to widen in character and work until it reached beyond mortal horizons.

2. Customs.—Jesus' preaching reflected the customs, habits of thought, and laws of his times. It could not have been otherwise. He must make himself partly

intelligible to his audiences. Any page of the Gospels will show this fact. Observe the women at the mill, the Scripture-reading in the synagogue, the children at play, fastings, alms-giving, and feasts.

Jesus was the master of customs. He did not allow them to determine his preaching. With boldness and asserted authority he criticized and transgressed customs in order to give his own interpretations upon questions whose meaning and limits these customs had pretended to fix. His originality could raise institutions and customs above the low externalism of the Pharisees and give them place amid the immortal hills of grace and truth. He could dare assert the higher law for man than the quietism of an unsympathetic Sabbath, and could risk his reputation by helpful fellowship with the sinners. He would not be limited save by his own greatness.

Jesus has been charged with the accommodation of his preaching to the current thought of his times. It is claimed that he simply shared the narrow and erroneous ideas of his contemporaries on many subjects of his ministry, and hence there is little originality in his preaching. Special attention is directed to the doctrines of the Messianic Hope, the belief in a physical resurrection, the teachings about fallen angels, and the idea of the eternal punishment of the wicked. Critics have asserted that Jesus ignorantly accepted these and other false opinions with all the crassness and externalism of his day. Other critics think that Jesus used these doctrines for his own preaching, though he himself did not really believe in them, accommodation being easier than absolute newness.

Against such calumnies we protest. The jesuitic method of making the end justify the means has no more justification in doctrines than in morals. Jesus was competent to pass upon the current theology and was too good to parade his ideas under false forms. Whatever current statements he used were filled with his own deeper interpretation. He did not hesitate to condemn error. Many old terms had become effete with the accumulated opinions of the rabbis; Jesus put new life and power into these, because he gave them a larger spiritual meaning. His genius and originality transformed the old to make them the symbols of the new life and religion. He must be interpreted not according to the current beliefs but according to his new accent and relations of these.

3. The Scriptures.—Scholars have diligently compared the words of Jesus with the Old Testament to indicate the extent of his dependence and the narrowness of the chance for originality. Sentences, phrases and words have been cited with great gusto. It cannot be doubted that the inner life of Jesus had felt the formative force of the Old Testament and that his words are rich in its phraseology, and yet his originality is not thereby lessened.

He did not consider that his ministry was committed to the sole task of expounding the Scriptures. His originality exhibited itself in his unusual treatment of the sacred literature. He aroused the bitter hatred of the current doctors of the law by his boldness in offering new interpretations, changes, and even additions in teachings. He claimed for his own words the same authority that had long been assigned to the teachings of Moses, Isaiah, and the other prophets.

Out of the Old Testament he had drawn help for his own experience and had used it for the starting-point for his ministry, but his genius led him to announce what had not before come into man's religious horizon. He was bold enough to be original in his affirmation that the Mosaic grant of divorce had been an accommodation to the demand of the hardness of men's hearts, while the only true annulment of marriage could be recognized and declared because of marital unfaithfulness. He transferred the sin of adultery to the lustful desire, the act being fully condemned. His own self-sacrifice should replace the Mosaic system and God should be known as the Father.

4. Non-Jewish forces.—Many efforts have been made to show that Jesus received a non-Jewish influence. Greek philosophy, Confucianism, the corrupted Judaistic Essenism, and other foreign systems have been suggested as entering into the thought of Jesus. It is yet to be demonstrated that he really came into actual contact with these forces. The most that can be truthfully said of these alleged dependencies is that the thoughts are the common property of all religious thought. God has not left himself without some witness in the aspirations and strivings of the heart for the supreme values of life, even though the people have wandered into corrupt heathenism. Similarity in thought and expression does not indicate dependence always.

Evidence is yet wanting to show that Jesus borrowed from these non-Jewish ideas. Jesus confirmed his claim to originality by his stress and spirituality, given to these basal gropings for truth. He brought them from the place of hope and darkness into a divine authority and light.

## II. Originality in Method

1. The miracle accessory.—The homiletics of Jesus contained the miracle accessory, which no previous teacher or later preacher ever distinctively employed. With the Hebrew prophets there had been sporadic miracles for definite occasions, and later apostolic preaching was associated with miracles in the name of Jesus Christ. But Jesus made miracles an essential, though subordinate, part of his homiletics. It was his unparalleled originality that made it possible for him to give this visible, attractive, and unusual attestation to his oral ministry. Imitations of this method have only heightened his value. In this homiletical method he differed from other speakers not in degree but in kind. He stood alone.

2. Discourse forms.—There is originality of use and originality of invention. Of the former Shakespeare is a towering example; so likewise is our Lord. The ordinary forms of discourse were used by Jesus, but with new force. The Hebrew favorites of wisdom sayings, the interrogation, humor, irony, invective, persuasion, and the parable entered naturally as discourse forms, for Jesus adopted the speech of his day. His originality here was in degree, not kind. He has especially immortalized the parable as a homiletical instrument.

3. Power and authority.—Jesus was original in his preaching with power and authority. His was a new note in public discourse. His age was familiar with the recital of second-hand opinions. New thought had a ban upon it; only the old was

true, even though the infirmity and senility of age attached thereto. Yesterday completed the time limit of thought; there could be neither today nor tomorrow.

But Jesus was not nearsighted. Fresh and pungent, clear and catchy for the memory, his words could not be compared to those of the accredited teachers without detriment to the latter. The public was quick to notice the new method. His friends rejoiced, and his foes were provoked, to recognize his genius and originality. The power of the Holy Spirit and the authority of immediate knowledge of the truth could not fail to give his homiletics an original element.

### III. Originality in Doctrine

1. New accents.—Accent is interpretative of truth and indicative of the mental ability of the preacher. To make a familiar friend radiate a new glory is the privilege of genius, artist, poet, inventor, and preacher, sharing the common aim with varied means. Humility had been accented previously, but Jesus was the first to gird himself with towel to bathe his disciples' feet in order that humility might have a fadeless example. Men had before spoken of brotherly love and forgiveness, but no one had ever stressed them into symbols of the divine graces. The Good Samaritan was a new interpretation of the brotherhood of man seen in the brotherhood of need. The accent of Jesus was original.

2. New truths.—Jesus made contributions to religious thought. He did not confine himself to worn-out truths, even though he rejuvenated them. A brief citation may be made of these new revelations of Jesus. He preached the fatherhood of God as applying only to those who had been joined in the fellowship of nature to himself through the mediation of the Son—John 8:42, 44; 14:23. From him came the doctrines of the new birth, the exaltation to greatness through humble service, the personal leadership of the Holy Spirit in the individual and corporate life of Christianity, the Church as the organized force for righteousness in the kingdom of God, and the universal priesthood of believers.

### IV. Originality in Person

1. Christology.—His personality is fundamental to his originality. Christology explains homiletics. Jesus remains without a peer in preaching because no other approached his person. Apologies are made for men on the ground of their age limits and sins; they must be judged according to the standards of their times. But no one thinks it necessary to speak thus of Jesus. His originality was due to his unique personality, for he was the Son of God and Son of man. Back of his words was himself. Elements and forces of deity and humanity met in indescribable and indivisible unity. One may think into separation these two sides of his person and even try to refer certain experiences of his life to each, but the oneness of life is in each word and act of Jesus. He was the original and Master Preacher because he was the God-man.

2. *Endowment* (provision with a quality, ability or asset).—Here it will suffice to indicate that Jesus' mental and spiritual endowment were not in the ordinary measure. Breadth of truth, depth of understanding, and sympathy for the sinful and destitute differentiated Jesus from other persons. His inner life was beyond the range of men. Intellect, emotions, and will functioned more nobly than in any

other individual. Jesus had more of himself to put into his discourses than other preachers. His ministry reflected his endowment.

3. Self-communication.—Jesus was more than a formal announcer of truth. He gave himself in and through his preaching. The sincere believer in his message felt that somehow the graces of the Preacher's own life had flowed into his own. Jesus reincarnated his message in the lives of his followers. A creative force accompanied the delivery to enable the penitent heart to attain the benefits of a new life; invitations to discipleship were accompanied by an invisible but powerful enabling power that brought the person into harmony with Jesus at least in essentials.

Jesus made disciples by his self-giving. Personal magnetism and grace and persuasive oratory would not suffice to explain this element of his originality. He so imparted himself to men as to make them like himself. No other teacher or preacher could claim such originality. The later Christian preaching has discovered the same results in the preaching of Jesus Christ; lives have been transformed and transfigured. In his own ministry Jesus exercised this divine prerogative. He cannot share this privilege with another; he remains incomparable and original.

## V. Originality in Life's Outlook

1. Homiletical egoism.—Jesus' preaching was original in its homiletical egoism. His outlook upon life was personal and self-centered. His preaching radiated from himself. What he would be and do in the history of men constituted his message. This was his prerogative, declared in his words, confirmed in his deeds, and redeemed in his post-resurrection effects upon men.

Even the most ambitious aspirant for honors would hardly dare to imitate Jesus in this regard. What would be egoism in Jesus would degenerate into egotism in another. Lovers of self there have been who have sought their own prominence, but they have usually been regarded as arrogant impostors. It seemed natural that Jesus should have filled his preaching with himself. His outlook was from within outward.

2. New world-epoch.—The preaching of Jesus was original in its prophecy of a new order for the world. Through him and his preaching a new state of religion should come into being. Let a few cases be enough to justify the contention.

Jesus called the Twelve that he might form the apostolate with an age-long supremacy over the forces of evil. He gave a preliminary outline of the organic principles of the church, whose mission should enlarge with the years. He affirmed that contact with God could come only through himself as the Son of God. He invited the weary and heavy-laden ones to himself for rest and assumed to draw all men to himself. Other men have had their Utopias, but Jesus realized his. His preaching held out for the world a new epoch. His life, death, and influence made such attainable. He was original in his gift of a new perspective and a new start to the world's history.

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