

Dr. Raoul Dederen



A Christian theologian ponders what it means for Christians to believe in Jesus the Messiah.

Sabbat Shalom*: Dr. Dederen, we are very thankful that you are willing to give us your time for this reflection on a very important topic. Certainly, one of the most important questions in religion is the expectation of a Messiah. In what way is Christianity different from other religions in the expectation of the Messiah?

Dederen: There are similarities and dissimilarities. When you refer to other religions, I assume you have in mind worldwide religions.

Shabbat Shalom: Yes.

Dederen: One of the basic differences, even between Christianity and Judaism, is the understanding of the role and the person of the Messiah. In my opinion, the role of the Messiah in the Scriptures—whether Jewish or Christian—seems to proceed from a different understanding of the person of the Messiah. Indeed, one should remember that Jesus was

more interested in having people understand him in terms of who he was as a person, rather than in terms of what he taught. Rarely, if ever at all, did he ask his disciples, “What do people think about what I teach?” The question he raised, a question central to the Gospel according to Matthew was, “Who do people say that I am?” So the *person* of Jesus is central to Christianity—Christ as

God’s Messiah. Jesus of Nazareth does not sustain the same relation to Christianity that other founders of worldwide religions sustain to the faith which they initiated. Though exceptional for his teaching, he is significant primarily for his person.

Shabbat Shalom: Tell us more on the relationship, more on the knowledge of the person.

Dederen: In most other reli-

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Before coming to the United States in 1964, Dr. Dederen served seven years in the pastoral ministry in Belgium and ten years on the theological faculty of the French Adventist Seminary in France. The author of numerous articles, he has also served some twenty years as a member of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches.

gions the emphasis is on what the founder has taught. For instance, if I understand Islam correctly, the true Muslim is one who faithfully follows and practices the teachings of Mohammed, among other things ritual prayers several times a day, almsgiving, fasting during the month of Ramadan, and the pilgrimage to Mecca. For the Christian Scriptures, however, the true Christian is one who, while faithfully following the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, does so because he or she has developed a close and personal relationship with him. The fundamental question for the Christian is, "How do I relate to the *person* of Jesus Christ?"

Shabbat Shalom: The who is more important than the what.

Dederen: Very much so. Now, that makes an immense difference in one's understanding of the role of the Messiah. He is not just one teacher among others; for the Scripture-centered Christian he is fully God.

Shabbat Shalom: So this brings us to the next question. Why do we need a Messiah? Why, from the Christian perspective, do we need a Messiah? Wouldn't God be able to fulfill His mission without the Messiah?

Dederen: Much depends, in my opinion, on what you understand by God's mission. The role of the Messiah is essential because of the sinful condition in which humanity finds itself. Jesus is not just a prophet. What his contemporaries lacked was not so much another prophet, sent to tell us about the will of God. There had been a long line of them from Abraham to John the Baptizer. What we needed was a personal self-disclosure of God, one who would reveal to us the person and charac-

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ter of God, who He really is, who would reveal God's answer to the tragedy of sin, His solution to the alienation between us and God, i.e. the sacrificial Messiah, the substitutionary conqueror of sin and death, who would call us back to God. I can't sufficiently underline this. The secret of Christianity is not so much a connection to a set of teachings as it is a relationship to a person.

Shabbat Shalom: In that sense, this definition of the relationship of a Messiah is very close to the Jewish one. What is important here is not necessarily what you think, but how you relate to God. In Judaism, they go beyond; they are more specific, and they say what is important is what you are and what you do in relation to that . . .

Dederen: Yes. In genuine Christianity, likewise, what matters most is to understand who we are, how we relate to God and what we do on that basis.

Shabbat Shalom: Yes. How would you see the Messiah from a Christian point of view in the Hebrew Bible? Do you think it is possible to see the Messiah in the Hebrew Bible?:

Dederen: Oh, yes, definitely so. It may be that our insistence as Seventh-day Adventists on the need to encourage people to study the Hebrew Scriptures as well as the New Testament has contributed to our awareness of the Messianic dimension of the Hebrew Bible. I think it is not difficult to find the Messiah in the Hebrew Scriptures. God was concerned about the ability of His people to

meet and recognize Him when the time would come. Hence He gave us the Hebrew Scriptures.

Shabbat Shalom: Do you see any difference in the way the Messiah is presented in the Hebrew Scriptures and the way he is presented in the New Testament or in Christian tradition?

Dederen: In the Hebrew Scriptures, if I understand them correctly, "Messiah," i.e. "the anointed one," was a term applied preeminently to the king. He was designated to office by an anointing ceremony. Like the priest, who was consecrated to his office in a similar manner, the king was regarded as God's representative. Among the Hebrew anointed kings, David came to have a special significance, which lasted long after his death. Amid the vicissitudes that followed his reign, various prophets exhorted their faithless countrymen to return to their God and to seek "David their king." In Isaiah's writings, for instance, a series of Messianic passages portray him as a military hero, the king of justice and peace who will reign in righteousness among his people. Later on, in the days of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the idea of a kingly ruler gave place to another concept; the Messianic king gave place to a shepherd, reminiscent of the shepherd and the suffering servant that Isaiah too had announced.

Though centuries later, in the days prior to Jesus of Nazareth, David the king will clearly reappear, the disappointed expectations of postexilic Judaism, and a new conception of the promised Messiah through whose humiliation and sorrow God's sinning people would find salvation, proved to be a leaven working powerfully the Messianic ideal of the "Son of Man" in the consciousness of Jesus of Nazareth and that of his follow-

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ers.

Shabbat Shalom: This particular aspect, then, will be the suffering aspect. There is not another one you think which . . .

Dederen: I think the Messiah-King is also very much present in the New Testament.

Shabbat Shalom: The Messiah has come according to Christians 2,000 years ago. Are the Christian people still waiting for the Messiah?

Dederen: You mean the Messiah-King?

Shabbat Shalom: Messiah-King. In your view, what is the situation of Christianity with regards to this hope of the Messiah?

Dederen: Many Christians believe in a second coming of the Messiah, this time as Messiah-King. How many among them really cherish it as a hope that determines their lifestyle, I don't know. It reminds me of something that occurred a few years ago. My wife and I were spending three months in Israel, part of a community of scholars of various denominations concerned with

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Christian unity. I shared in various presentations, dialogues, meditations, vesper services, etc. At the end of our stay I was rather surprised to hear my colleagues tell us that we seemed to really believe in the second coming of Christ. When asked what they meant, they told us, "Well, we too hold that belief, but in your case, it seems to be a conviction, a motivation, that determines your way

of looking at things."

Shabbat Shalom: So what you are observing among Christians in general is that they still believe, in theory, in the coming of the Messiah which, of course, for Christians would be the second coming of Christ, but for them it's not relevant for their life?

Dederen: I may not be prepared to say that, yet it doesn't seem to have affected their lives very much. Let me add that Seventh-day Adventists run the same risk.

Shabbat Shalom: So, more and more Christians do not believe in the historical coming of the Messiah which they allegorize or . . .

Dederen: I had a conversation a couple of months ago with one of the most outstanding Christian theologians in North America. He told me that he had given up the hope in a literal coming of the Messiah-King. He argued that though Jesus often spoke of the kingdom of God, which indeed was a leitmotiv of his preaching according to the synoptic Gospels, we could not be sure that he ever called himself a king. Hence he said, "Why should I today expect from him something that he hasn't even led me to believe was one of his concerns?" Yet he assured me that he still put his faith in Christ's return.

Shabbat Shalom: What is the second coming of Christ for him?

Dederen: His own conversion. In his view the first coming of Jesus occurred some 1,900 years ago, when he was born in Bethlehem. "His second coming," he added, "took place when I accepted him as my Savior and Lord, and passed from death to life."

Shabbat Shalom: This is then just an existential experience . . .

Dederen: He is a sincere Christian, who strikes me as having undergone a genuine conversion.

Shabbat Shalom: So it is possible, then, to be a Christian and not believe in the historical, effective coming of the Messiah?

Dederen: Obviously it is. I have encountered Christians who no longer regard a literal, visible second coming of the Messiah as a

central point of their faith, but have "demythologized" it.

Shabbat Shalom: Let me now ask you more in the wake of that observation. Do you think, from your own perspective, it is possible to be a Christian and not believe in the coming of the Messiah? I mean, the word Christ, after all, is in the root of the Christian identity.

Dederen: Allow me to say that though it may sound arrogant, I have great difficulties in understanding how one can be a Bible-centered believer and declare untrue the historical return of the

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King-Messiah.

Shabbat Shalom: Why?

Dederen: Because it is one of the core teachings of the Scriptures, not to mention of Jesus of Nazareth himself.

Shabbat Shalom: So, this is a part of his teaching, this is not necessarily a part of his person?

Dederen: I'm coming to that. A Christian, to me, is by definition a disciple of Jesus Christ. His or her main concern should be what he has taught, so that through what he has taught he or she may find out who he is. When I say what he taught, I mean what he said and did. Assuming that one accepts the Christian Scriptures as dependable sources of information, I can hardly avoid the conclusion that the second coming of Jesus of Nazareth is of unusual importance.

Shabbat Shalom: Why is it so important?

Dederen: Because of both its content and its implications, this scriptural teaching leads me to a closer and deeper understanding of God. Here I learn that God, who from the first created me after His

image, longs for a personal relationship with me. King-Messiah will come back to put an end to sin and evil on this earth and to reestablish the original relationship. I was 19 years old, attending an electric school, when World War II came to an end. During those years, the devastation and death, the wickedness and viciousness of human beings, left me deeply disturbed. Why did God allow such things to happen? What was the meaning of life? Grasping the great-controversy theme in the Scriptures tore the veil down and gave new meaning to life. At least in my case.

Shabbat Shalom: What do you mean by great controversy?

Dederen: What I mean is that the struggle we witness today between good and evil is a struggle between two beings, two persons, God and Satan. The Messiah will return and, overcoming evil, will bring things back to what God had in mind from the beginning. This will be a joyful day.

Shabbat Shalom: So, it's interesting that your awareness of this importance of the Messiah caught you in the aftermath of the Holocaust of the Second World War.

Dederen: The Holocaust among other dreadful tragedies. Unquestionably.

Shabbat Shalom: So, in other words, your reemphasis on the mission of the Messiah comes as the result of a Holocaust reflection, am I correct?

Dederen: Certainly parallel to it.

Shabbat Shalom: So it's very important that the Messiah come, because one of his missions is to change things?

Dederen: Yes. And it had such an impact on me that I changed careers and became a student of

Scriptures and a minister of the gospel.

Shabbat Shalom: Well, then, if I ask you what Christians expect of the Messiah, you already gave the answer: they expect a change in the world; it means an external, historical reality, not just an existential conversion.

Dederen: Very much so. At the same time it is not just the end of what is evil. It is also meeting personally the Messiah. It is the return of a person with whom I'm invited to get into relationship by faith. It is not merely mountains shaking and

islands rolling in the sea, or rocks falling down the mountains—it's also the return of Messiah-King, the return of Jesus Christ.

Shabbat Shalom: Let me ask you a question in relation to the Jewish-Christian polemic discussion. Is it possible to recognize the Messiah—it's a very difficult question—is it possible to recognize the

Messiah as Jesus Christ without having heard about this Messiah being Jesus Christ?

Dederen: Do you mean without having heard or read about him? I suppose it would be most difficult. Which brings us back to the importance and role of the Scriptures.

Shabbat Shalom: Martin Buber made a little humorous midrash which I will not tell here, but one of the principles, one of the ideas of this in the story was that he said when the Messiah will come the Jew and the Christian will recognize him, and this will be the same Messiah. We are talking about the good Jew and the good Christian, of course.

Dederen: Yes, I think so. Especially if he is referring to Jews

and Christians familiar with the Scriptures.

Shabbat Shalom: That's right. Yes. I think we have understood as we are listening to you that, indeed, the Messiah is a very central and crucial topic in Christian thinking, Christian life.

Dederen: He certainly is.

Shabbat Shalom: And so we are coming to the end of our interview, and I would like to ask you if there is something important you have not said that you want to say about it.

Dederen: I don't know. Maybe I would go back to what I have referred to several times in our conversation. Christianity is not simply a compilation of laws and ordinances to be followed. It transcends that. Those laws and precepts have been given not as an end in themselves, but as a means to reach a relationship with Jesus.

Shabbat Shalom: So you mean doctrines and the beliefs.

Dederen: Yes. Because Christianity is Christ, the Messiah. Christianity is the Messiah.

Shabbat Shalom: And as implied earlier, there is a close bond between God and the Messiah. So Christianity is a theology, then, in that sense, a Messianic theology.

Dederen: I think so. Christian, and I assume Jewish, theology without a study of the person of God, and of the person of the Messiah, would be rather empty and without much meaning for human life. It would be merely an academic, intellectual transaction, not too different from a philosophical exercise.

Shabbat Shalom: It was very enlightening. Certainly many of our readers will think over this interview and beyond this interview. Thank you, Dr. Dederen, for your willingness to spend some time with us.

Dederen: Thank you.

*Dr. Jacques Doukhan conducted this interview.

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