

## Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up!

The Historical Jesus for Today. Mark 1:14-15; II Corinthians 11:3-6, 12-13

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In the long running T.V. game show that began in the 1950's, To Tell the Truth, three contestants all claimed to be a person described as having an unusual vocation or experience. After the host read a brief biographical sketch written by the mystery guest, the panelists asked questions of the three contestants, the mystery guest and the two imposters. When the questioning was finished, the panelists each voted on who the real mystery guest was. The host said, "Will the real John/Jane X please stand up!" There was a moment of suspense. Sometimes one or two of the contestants would begin to stand but then sit back down. Finally the real mystery guest stood up.

Scholars have been engaged in what we call "The Quest for the Historical Jesus" for more than 200 years. Countless books have been written and debates held, and we are still asking, "Will the real Jesus please stand up!"

In reality the debate is 2,000 years old. The apostle Paul, writing twenty-some years after Jesus' death, wrote of the *hyperlian apostoloi* or super-apostles and the

*pseudapostolos*, the pseudo, or false apostles who had come into Corinth preaching “another Jesus” and a “different gospel.” (II Cor.11: 3-6, 12-13)

## I

The quest for the historical Jesus is an important one so to correct false and fanciful pictures of Jesus that distort the true meaning of the Christian faith.

There is, however, more to Jesus than the historical Jesus; there is what I call “the more-than-historical Jesus, the living Christ present to us in the Spirit of God. Harry Emerson Fosdick termed them “The Christ of History” and “the Christ of Experience.” Marcus Borg termed them “the Pre-Easter Jesus” and “the Post-Easter Jesus.” There would be no Christianity without both.

We need as clear a picture of the historical Jesus as possible lest we fall under the sway of those who preach “another Jesus” and a “different gospel” from the real Jesus who lived 2,000 years ago.

There is a bewildering and contradictory array of Jesuses in America today: Capitalist Jesus and Social Gospel Jesus; Jesus the Zealot, the Revolutionary, and Jesus the Pacifist; Jesus Savior of Souls and Jesus the Community Organizer; Jesus of the Prosperity Gospel and Jesus of the Poor; Tea-Party Jesus and Justice Jesus; Nationalistic Jesus and Universalist Jesus; Jesus of the Right and Jesus of the Left; the Jesus whose sole aim was to get us into heaven and the Jesus whose passion was the transformation of earth.

Who *was* he, *is* he? Can we enlist him in *any* cause? Are there causes for which he wishes to enlist us? Or, when it comes to Jesus in there no *there* there, to use the words of Gertrude Stein about Oakland California.

I believe there is a *there* there, that there are crucial things we can know about Jesus of Nazareth that can correct false and fanciful pictures of Jesus. And there is a *more* there too, a living Christ who continues to speak, challenge, heal and call us to the way of the kingdom of God.

## II

This morning we will concentrate on the historical Jesus. John Meier, a noted New Testament scholar proposed a thought experiment: Gather a Catholic scholar, a Protestant scholar, a Jewish scholar and an agnostic scholar and put them in the bowels of the Harvard Divinity School Library and say, “Don’t come out until you have a consensus document on who Jesus was.” What would such a consensus document look like; a “reliable sketch” of the historical Jesus? Here is where most scholars would begin.

- ❖ Jesus was born a Galilean Jew around 4 BCE just before the death of Herod the Great.
- ❖ He was raised in a peasant village name Nazareth, a village of 200-300 residents. Four miles away was a bustling Roman/Hellenistic city named Sepphoris. Jesus may have been more cosmopolitan than we thought.

- ❖ He probably had brothers and sisters and was trained by his father to be a *tekton*, a carpenter, or skilled worker. He and his father may have helped with the massive building projects in Sepphoris.
- ❖ His ministry began in the late 20's with his baptism by John the Baptizer. It lasted between 18 months and three years, mostly in Galilee but may have included some trips to Jerusalem for feast days before his final trip to Jerusalem.
- ❖ He attracted a growing crowd of followers and aroused mounting opposition.
- ❖ His principle message and mission concerned "the kingdom of God" which he believed was drawing graciously and urgently near. He invited people to enter it and receive it. That is, it was a realm we entered and which entered us. As Mark says, "Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; trun and believe in the good news.'" Mark 1:14-15
- ❖ He was a healer and exorcist who brought healing to body, mind and spirit without regard to one's social, religious or moral standing. These miracles were witnessed by friend and foe alike, friends attributing the miracles to the power of God and foes attributing them to the power of Satan.
- ❖ He was a teacher whose most distinctive forms of teaching were in aphorisms, short, vivid, memorable sayings, and parables, short arresting

- stories which helped the listeners imagine what the kingdom of God was like, and how their lives might be part of it.
- ❖ He befriended sinners and outcasts, eating and drinking with them as a sign of the kingdom's welcome and forgiveness.
  - ❖ He included women in his closest circle of disciples and welcomed children as receivers of the kingdom of God.
  - ❖ He was a prophet who denounced the economic, political and social injustices of his day and prophesied the destruction of the temple.
  - ❖ He entered Jerusalem on a donkey on Sunday of Passover week around 28-30 CE. He "cleansed" the temple, driving the money changers out, and again spoke of the destruction of the temple.
  - ❖ These actions and words escalated opposition to him and led the religious and political elite, afraid of an uprising against Rome to conspire to put him to death. Although Jesus taught non-violence and the love of enemy, his opponents were gripped with paranoia about what might happen at Passover, that incendiary feast day when Jews remembered their rescue from Pharaoh in Egypt.
  - ❖ The Roman governor Pilate sentenced Jesus to death as a would-be "king of the Jews." He was executed by the Romans on a Roman cross. It is historical untruth and anti-Semitic theology to say "The Jews killed Jesus."

Here are some dimensions of the historical Jesus I would like to emphasize today.

1. Jesus was an observant Jew who came to renew not destroy his Jewish heritage. Many of the worst distortions of who Jesus was come from the ignoring or discounting of his Jewishness.
2. As a healer and exorcist Jesus showed God's desire for the healing of our body, mind and spirit. You could say, he gave out free health care to all who came to him.
3. He was a prophet of justice. When he said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness" we should translate in good Hebrew fashion, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after justice and righteousness." He criticized the religious leaders of his day with these words:

Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites. For you tithe mint, dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy and faith (Matthew 23:3).

4. Jesus taught non-violence and was a pacifist. He taught us not to return evil for evil, to turn our cheeks and to love our enemies. When the authorities came to arrest him he did not take up arms, and he reproved a disciple who took up his sword. He chose to die at the hand of unjust power rather than to resist it with violence. There are way too few Christians and

churches who take Jesus seriously here. Among them are the so-called “peace churches”: Quakers, Mennonites, Amish.

5. Jesus taught us to pray as he prayed to God, as *Abba*, perfect-parent of us all. At the heart of his spirituality was his *Abba*-experience of God as God’s Beloved. When baptized a voice from heaven said, “You are my son, The Beloved.” Jesus invited us all to experience ourselves as *Abba*’s Beloved.

#### IV

Now I turn to four pictures of Jesus today which offer the false gospel of another Jesus.

1) The first false gospel of another Jesus is a subtle one. It is the worship of Jesus instead of following him. It is Christianity without the historical Jesus. Jesus didn’t say “worship me” but “follow me”. Christians properly worship Jesus as the risen Lord, but not at the expense of following him. It is the Christianity of the Apostles’ Creed, which leaves out Jesus’ ministry and teaching, divorced from the Christianity of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said it best: “Not everyone who says ‘Lord Lord’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” (Matt 7:22)

2) The second is the Jesus of the Prosperity gospel. Those whom Paul called the super-apostles and false apostles had come into Corinth preaching a gospel of health, wealth and success. It was a Christianity without the cross.

Suffering in life was looked upon with suspicion. If you suffered any kind of weakness, there must be something wrong with your faith. They attacked the apostleship of Paul and made fun of his weakness.

We have such super-apostles among us today in the form of the Prosperity Gospel. It is a gospel of health, wealth and success. If you do not have these something is wrong with your faith. They build super-churches. Their worship is a spiritual form of entertainment and the preaching is a program of sanctified self-help techniques.

Super-churches locate themselves among the rich, well and powerful. They draw enormous resources to themselves.

In contrast we have servant-churches who devote themselves to caring for the poor, sick, ostracized, forgotten. Barbara Brown Taylor describes these churches as “the poured out church”, following Jesus who poured himself out for us and for all.

The prosperity Gospel preaches “another Jesus” and “a different gospel.” Someone has defined a heretic as someone who has a complete grasp of a half-truth. The Prosperity Gospel is a half-truth heresy. God of course wants us to be well and prosper, but that is not God’s sole aim.

The sole aim of the church is the increase in the love of God and neighbor. Jesus warned about the corrupting effects of riches. How hard it is, he said, for



a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. It is easier for a camel to slip through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. (Matthew 19:24) Or to paraphrase Buechner: “It is easier for a Mercedes to pass through the night deposit slot at Bank of America than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God”.

3) The third false gospel is Nationalistic Jesus, an America-First Jesus. This gospel purports to follow Jesus but the Nation is their god.

I offer the example of Robert Jeffress the pastor of First Baptist Church Dallas, member of President Trumps Council of Evangelical Advisors and preacher at the worship service for Trump on Inauguration Day. After President Trump warned North Korea saying we would bring “fire and fury like the world has never seen”, Rev. Jeffress said God has given Trump the authority to take out Kim Jong-Un and use whatever means necessary to defeat evil.

What would the non-violent Historical Jesus say? There’s a story in Luke’s gospel where the disciples of Jesus have gone ahead to secure lodging in a Samaritan village. The village refuses to offer hospitality. The disciples return to Jesus and ask him to rain down fire on the village and destroy it. The text says Jesus *rebuked* them, as he rebukes those today all too ready to rain down fire and fury on those whom America calls evil and enemies. (See Luke 9:51-56)

4) The fourth false gospel of another Jesus is the Alt-Christianity of the Alt-Right, a gospel of white supremacy. It has been around since the beginnings of America. Slavery was America's Original Sin, and the Bible was used to justify it.

It is ascendant today in the Alt-Right movement which includes New-Nazis, white supremacists and white nationalists. It claims the superiority of white persons over people of color and Jews. Such a gospel took over in Germany in the Nazi horror. It is ascendant in America today.

We saw it in the Alt-Right, neo-Nazi, White Supremacist rally in Charlottesville. Christian symbols were mixed in with the Nazi symbol, the Confederate flag and virulent anti-Jewish chants. They want to "restore" America as a white ethno state and have created, as Brian McClaren has termed, an Alt-Christianity.

I remember the days when thousands of blacks were lynched. Christian symbols were always there and Christian hymns sung, like "The Old Rugged Cross."

Alt-Right Christianity is filled with xenophobia, hate of the one who is different, other, a stranger and thus anti-immigrant. It is tinted with misogyny, fear and hatred of women, and it is homophobic with a hatred of LGBT persons. Hate piles upon hate

And here comes the brown skinned man of Galilee who crossed the boundaries of race, nation, religion and gender to bring the love of God to all. He was himself a refugee as a child. He loved Samaritans so was accused of being a Samaritan.

I quote Robert Jeffress again. Defending President Trump's decision to end DACA, the program of protection for children of immigrants, he said, "God is not necessarily an open borders guy." (I don't have enough time to unpack how terrible that bit of theology is.)

This is why the historical Jesus is so important. Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up! And, will we follow him when he does?