

## JESUS REVISITED

**Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper**

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Every once in a while, after someone learns that I am a Unitarian Universalist minister, they will ask, “Are you Christian?” Depending on who is asking the question and how much time I have to answer, I try to explain that Unitarianism and Universalism originally arose as protest movements within the early Christian church, in opposition to the doctrine of the Trinity (Unitarians) and to the idea that the loving God described by Jesus would want to condemn non-believers to eternal damnation (Universalism). Then may come a more pointed question, “What do you believe about Jesus?”

One of the most unfortunate developments in American religion is the success of fundamentalists in defining what it means to be Christian. I will be discussing this in greater depth in my Second Sunday sermon about religious diversity in October. Fundamentalists have narrowed the definition of Christianity to a particular set of beliefs about who Jesus was and what he taught his followers. This version of Christianity is based mainly on the Gospel of John, which portrays Jesus as the self-proclaiming divine Son of God, and the writings of the Apostle Paul, who regarded Jesus as the Savior figure whose sacrificial death rescues his followers from God's eternal punishment for their sinfulness.

The sin-and-salvation interpretation of Jesus' mission permeates not only evangelical Christianity, but also the view of Christianity held by many religious liberals. Even mainstream media, who are often accused of having a liberal bias, use terms like “Christian music,” or “Christian bookstores,” or “Christian candidates for public office,” to refer only to a particular version of the Christian faith. In his book titled *Stealing Jesus: How Fundamentalism Betrays Christianity*, Bruce Bawer observes that this “indicates the extent of the Religious Right's success at getting even some of the most responsible and reflective elements of mainstream America to accept, however unconsciously, the notion that [evangelical conservatives] are the only true Christians—or, at the very least, are in some way ‘more’ Christian, or more urgently or

authentically or fully Christian, than other Christians.” [p. 13] **Today I want to challenge that notion.**

The English writer C. S. Lewis is probably best known as the author of children’s books such as *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. He was also one of the most effective promoters of conservative Christianity. It was Lewis who argued that, since Jesus proclaimed himself God in the Gospel of John, “there were only three logical possibilities: he was either **a liar, a lunatic, or the Lord**. Lewis’s thinking was that if Jesus was wrong in his claim—if he was not God—either he knew it or he did not know it. If he knew that he was not God but claimed he was, then he was a **liar**. If he was not God but genuinely thought he was, then he was crazy, a **lunatic**. The only other choice would be that he was right in what he claimed, in which case he really was the **Lord**. Lewis went on to argue that there are all sorts of reasons for thinking that Jesus was neither a liar nor a lunatic. The inevitable conclusion was that he must have been what he claimed to be. Jesus was the Lord God.” [Bart Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted*, p. 141] Over the years, many devout Christians—including Jimmy Carter—have used Lewis’s argument as a cornerstone of their belief that he was indeed the self-proclaimed Son of God.

In his book titled *Jesus, Interrupted*, New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman offers a fourth possibility: **legend**. As Ehrman explains it, “Of course I chose that word [legend] to maintain the alliteration. What I meant was not that Jesus himself was a legend. Of course not! I certainly believe that he existed and that we can say some things about him. What I meant was that the idea that he called himself God was a legend, which I believe that it is. This means that he doesn’t have to be either a liar, a lunatic, or the Lord. He could be a first-century Palestinian Jew who had a message to proclaim **other than his own divinity**.” [p. 144]

How can we resolve the different and sometimes conflicting images of Jesus that appear in the Bible? Unfortunately, there are no unbiased reports about him. The Greek and Roman historians of the first century make no mention of Jesus whatsoever. Around the year 90 C.E. (at about the same time as the Gospel of John was written) a Jewish historian named Flavius Josephus published a 20-volume history of the Jewish people. In it he mentions that Jesus was a wise man (a teacher) who had a large following, was a “doer of startling deeds,” and, at the

urging of Jewish religious leaders, was condemned to be crucified by Pontius Pilate. [Ehrman, p. 150] This account confirms the basic facts of Jesus' life, but offers no details about the words and deeds of the historical person Jesus of Nazareth. For that we are forced to rely on the four Gospels. As Ehrman points out, "These are not disinterested accounts by eyewitnesses, however. They are books written decades after the fact by authors who had heard stories about Jesus from the oral tradition, stories that had been altered and even made up over time. There were lots of discrepancies in these stories, and the Gospel writers themselves changed them as they saw fit." [p. 151]

The most glaring discrepancies are between the Gospel According to John and the other three Gospels, which are known collectively as the synoptic gospels. For example, the accounts of Jesus' final days differ significantly. "In Mark, Jesus eats the Passover meal (Thursday night) and is crucified the following morning. In John, Jesus does not eat the Passover meal but is crucified on the day before the Passover meal was to be eaten." [Ehrman, p. 27] Bart Ehrman's book *Jesus, Interrupted* provides numerous examples of such discrepancies throughout the New Testament. Does that mean we should throw up our hands and conclude that we cannot know **anything** about what Jesus actually said and did?

For the past 25 years, a group of scholars known as the Jesus Seminar have devoted their best efforts to analyzing the conflicting stories in the New Testament, and identified what they consider to be the most **authentic** accounts of Jesus' life and teachings. The founder and inspirational leader of the Jesus Seminar was the late Robert Funk, a maverick New Testament scholar who abandoned the secure world of academe so that he could share the insights of biblical scholarship with a wider public audience. In his book *Honest to Jesus*, Funk confronts the fundamentalists' image of Jesus as a redeemer who offers instant salvation to his followers. Funk says, "It is like a trip to McDonald's, where the menu is fixed, everything is cheap, and patience is not required. Such a diet has made the pious American fawning, flabby, and flatulent. Americans don't want religion unless it is handed to them on a platter, effort free, sacrifice free, but not fat free." [pp. 309-10]

Among the most courageous attempts to re-interpret the core of Jesus' life and teachings is the work of John Shelby Spong, an Episcopalian priest and bishop who has written more than twenty books, including *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism* and *A New Christianity for a New World*. His latest and perhaps final book is titled *Jesus for the Non-Religious*, in which he systematically **deconstructs** the fundamentalist myths about Jesus as a personal savior in order to **reconstruct** Jesus as a radical prophet who challenged the conventional religion of his time. "The call of Jesus," he writes, "is not a call to be religious. It is not a call to escape life's traumas, to find security, to possess peace of mind. All of those things are invitations to a life-contracting idolatry. The call of God through Jesus is a call to be fully human, to embrace insecurity without building protective fences, to accept the absence of peace of mind. . . . It is to see that God is the experience of life, love and being who is met at the edges of an expanded humanity." [p. 290]

During the 1970s, John Shelby Spong served as rector (minister) of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia—a church where Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis worshipped during the Civil War. He says, "I was drawn at that time, as I still am, to the person of Jesus in powerful and compelling ways, I was also bothered by and ultimately repelled by the distorting myths that surrounded him and stifled by the controlling religion that appeared to capture him. There were times when my frustration level was so high that I could barely perceive either his meaning or his power." [p. 291] In 1974 he offered a sermon there that expressed both his frustration and his hope for a new vision for a Christianity for the future. One of his parish members, a gifted poet named Lucy Newton Boswell Negus, converted his sermon into a poem titled "Christpower," which expresses his understanding of Jesus:

Look at him! Look not at his divinity, but look, rather, at his freedom.

Look not at the exaggerated tales of his power, but look, rather, at his infinite capacity to give himself away.

Look not at the first-century mythology that surrounds him, but look, rather at his courage to be, his ability to live, and the contagious quality of his love.

Stop your frantic search!

Be still and know that this is God: this love, this freedom, this life, this being;

And when you are accepted, accept yourself; when you are forgiven, forgive yourself;  
When you are loved, love yourself.

Grasp that Christpower and dare to be yourself!

[Spong, *Jesus for the Non-Religious*, pp. 292-93]

This is the image of Jesus that engages me, and it is the image of Jesus that I believe holds the greatest promise for progressive Christianity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What do you think?

## **DISCUSSION**

**HYMN # 34 “Though I May Speak with Bravest Fire”**

**CLOSING WORDS # 694** (by Frederick E. Gillis)