

Christians Who Ignore the Real Jesus

Many American Christians see themselves as devout followers of the theological Jesus but don't want to know much about the historical Jesus, the nonviolent radical who called on his followers to resist social injustice, writes Rev. Howard Bess.

By the Rev. Howard Bess

At one time in the study of Jesus from Nazareth, the Bible particularly the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were our most fruitful sources. They are still basic to the search for the real Jesus, but the study has recently expanded into the surrounding context of his life and teachings.

For centuries, Christians had only a theological Jesus defined in creeds and confessions of faith. According to this tradition, Jesus was sent by God to die for the sins of the world with an eventual destiny to rule the world from the holy city of Jerusalem where he would sit on the throne of the great King David.

However, in the Nineteenth Century, scholars began the search for the historical Jesus. That first search effectively ended when Albert Schweitzer wrote a book entitled *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, published in 1906 and translated into English in 1910. Schweitzer's conclusion was clear: No historical Jesus can be found in the New Testament.

Thus, the issue of the Jesus of history lay dormant until the mid-1950s when under the leadership of Rudolph Bultmann and his students another search for the real Jesus was pursued for some 15 to 20 years. But Bultmann and his colleagues came to the same conclusion as Schweitzer: No historical Jesus could be found in Matthew, Mark, Luke or John.

Still, the subject would not go away and a big breakthrough occurred in the 1970s when scholars using sources other than the Bible began reconstructing the social and political realities of First Century Palestine, particularly the Zealot movement whose seeds were in Galilee, Jesus's backyard.

The Zealot movement was dedicated to overthrowing the entire authority structure that controlled Palestine, including the Romans, all their retainers and enforcers, and the entire religious hierarchy. The Zealot movement was based in the peasant class, a majority of the people who lived in the Galilee in what scholars call "an advanced agrarian society."

Life for most people in an advanced agrarian society was not a pretty picture, filled with inequality, poverty and despair for most. Ownership and control of

land and farming was held by about 2 per cent of the population, a class of rich owners who lived in luxury in cities.

In Northern Palestine, the rich owners lived primarily in Sepphoris and Tiberias and seldom, if ever, visited the farms they owned. They controlled their land empires through a system of retainers and enforcers who extracted maximum wealth from the peasant workers.

Below the peasants on the socio-economic ladder were people who were considered unclean or degraded along with a sizeable population of expendables, primarily excess children of peasants who were turned out and left on their own.

Artisans were a separate class from peasants and also were considered below peasants in status. Joseph, the father of Jesus, was one such artisan. So, at best, Jesus and his family lived at a subsistence level. Opportunities for education were non-existent. This was the world of Jesus.

The great eye-opener for me was a book published in 1994 by New Testament scholar William Herzog II, who spent his scholarly career studying, teaching and writing about the parables of Jesus. The title of the book is *Parables as Subversive Speech*, with the subtitle, "Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed."

The book placed Jesus in the role of a brilliant but untrained teacher who was shaped by his commitment to God and to Jewish Old Testament law (Torah). His teaching tool was his parables through which he demanded justice. I have not read the parables in the same way since reading Herzog's volume.

The Jesus parables that we have in the Gospels and the movement of the Zealots dovetail into a scathing denunciation of the economic, political, social and religious conditions of the day. But there was one huge difference between Jesus and the Zealots. Zealots were committed to overthrowing by violence. Jesus was calling for revolution through non-violent justice. Nearly every Zealot man carried a large hidden knife and was ready to use it. Jesus told Zealots "Put up your sword."

Putting together the puzzle pieces of an historical Jesus is not complete. It is a work still in process. But enough has been done to show that there was a Jesus of history who vigorously attacked the religious, economic, social and political powers of his day in the name of justice.

The tragedy is that most people in the pews are completely unaware of the historical Jesus and its implications for what it means to be a Christian and to be a follower of Jesus. Why are they ignorant of this information? Their pastors have not told them.

Why have they not told them? I can think of at least three reasons. First, many American churches are led by untrained, poorly educated clergy who simply don't know the facts. Second, even those with quality seminary training have neglected their responsibility to continue reading and studying.

Third, there are a huge number of clergy who know the truth about Jesus but are afraid to tell their congregations because the clergy are not willing to ask their parish members to become involved in the real world and its issues. They are fearful of being involved themselves in the justice issues of our own day and they are fearful of losing their jobs

Clergy are too comfortable with a sweet Jesus who waits to take people to heaven.

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