

As One Unknown

sermon digest

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Luke 9:18-25

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A few weeks ago in our Wednesday night discussion we talked about the efforts of the scholars of the Jesus Seminar to distinguish the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith. Beginning its work in 1985, the seminar was composed of biblical scholars gathered mostly from colleges, seminaries, and universities across the United States. Although some scholars came and went over the course of the six years, some seventy-four stayed the course, gathering twice a year and collaborating with one another between gatherings. The results of their efforts were published in 1993 in the 550 page volume *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*. It contains the scholars' translation and commentary on the four Gospels in our Bible, plus the Gospel of Thomas, a collection of 114 sayings of Jesus, assembled perhaps in the early second century and discovered in Egypt in 1945. Adopting something of the familiar red letter edition of the Bible, the words the scholars agree probably originated with Jesus are red; and those they agree he may well have said are pink. Words that are more doubtful are gray, and words they agree are unlikely to have come from Jesus are black.

You may remember something of the whirlwind of controversy. The Jesus scholars' efforts incensed many of their colleagues who had concluded more than a half century ago that such efforts were not only futile, but unnecessary. After 130 years of efforts to isolate the historical Jesus from the Jesus of faith, Albert Schweitzer's celebrated *Quest for the Historical Jesus* pronounced the quest an abysmal failure, and Gospel scholars followed suit. Conservative scholars and many people in the pew interpreted the seminar's efforts as nothing short of an attack on the Bible and the Christian faith and denounced it as blasphemy.

In the midst of such controversy, those who would be faithful Christians are wise to do something more than hop on one or the other bandwagon or merely stick their head in the sand until it blows past. Faith is not so fragile that it shatters under close scrutiny. Faith that is taken seriously, faith that is central to everything we are, faith that is strong and desirous of growing stronger is a faith that looks such issues in the face, conscientiously and prayerfully gathering all the information it can and wrestling with it toward some resolution. In the words of my friend, Mack Hastings, the oldest and only retired member of our young congregation in St. Louis some 40 years ago, such faith seeks to leave "no stone unturned" in its search for truth.

Whether we find ourselves in agreement with the scholars on all of their findings or not, their efforts were and are important. Lest we dismiss them as impious interlopers into sacred territory, we should recognize that some of their names and many of the academic programs they represent are among the most noteworthy, the most acclaimed in our time. Their scholarship has kept and nurtured many ministers in the pulpit and many faithful in the pew. As a matter of fact, we have several of their books in our church library. More than reckless sensationalists, the scholars joined their best efforts and utilized the best tools of biblical, historical research to make their determinations. Those of us who would be faithful would do well to read and take seriously the results of their efforts—efforts which are reflective not just of the nature of honest, disciplined academic research, but which say volumes about the nature of the Bible and faith itself.

Consider, for example, the considerable lag between the time of Jesus' life and ministry and the point at which the Gospels were written—an interlude ranging from something like 30 years for the earliest (Mark) to 60 or more years for the latest (John). Add to this the fact that the oldest surviving manuscripts of the Gospels date 175 years after the death of Jesus and no two copies are exactly alike. The time gap, the scholars point out, is the equivalent of the lapse between the writing of the Declaration of Independence and 1950. "What if," they ask, "the oldest copies of the founding document dated only from 1950?" And more, what if we knew that in the meantime the document had been copied by hand over and over and over again. And what if in comparing those hand written copies we found changes, "corrections" incorporated into the text so that it became almost impossible to determine where the founding fathers left off and their successors intervened? The effort to use every historical tool at our disposal to get at the founding text would not be, then, an effort to undermine our founding document but to recover and preserve it. And so the efforts of the scholars

and of every person that seeks to peel back the layers of time are an effort to recover the “forgotten Jesus.” It is an effort to take with utmost seriousness the center of our faith by distinguishing Jesus and his life and words from the accumulation of deadening familiarity and the careless and (worse) convenient overlaying of time that obliterates his reality.

The scholars painstakingly analysed more than 5000 of the earliest Greek manuscripts, some of them mere fragments, focussing on more than 1500 sayings attributed to Jesus. Detailing changes that occurred between the formulation of the earliest and later accounts of Jesus’ teaching, the scholars found that some sayings that once stood alone were gathered into groups of sayings. Some were relocated into a different narrative context. Passages from Hebrew scripture or common lore were added to the lips of Jesus, and Matthew in particular leaned heavily on proof texts from the prophets. As time passed between the earliest and the later renditions of Jesus’ story, the story and in particular the words from his lips were “Christianized,” progressively making claims about his identity that had not been made earlier. Utilizing the “rigours” of investigative research and peer review and “offering no more than tentative claims based on historical probability” (“True scholarship,” the scholars contend, “aspires to no more,” remaining open to “new evidence and the development of new methodologies in analysing data”), the scholars came to the conclusion that more than 82% of the sayings did not originate with Jesus but were the “overlay” of the church. “Traces of the enigmatic sage from Nazareth remain,” they concluded, “traces that cry out for recognition and liberation.” The search for the authentic words of Jesus become, then, “a search for the forgotten Jesus,” the very center of the gospel story, the center, we say, of our faith.

A search for the forgotten Jesus is not inconsequential to the church. The questions of history matter. Using every tool at our disposal to get at a true picture, a true understanding of the man Jesus is worthy of our best efforts; and I cannot help but be appreciative of the professed limits acknowledged by the scholars. I could only wish that our efforts in the church were as serious. I find the scholars’ acknowledgement of the finite nature of human understanding and their openness to ongoing investigation and learning appealing, particularly when contrasted to those within the church who slam the door shut on continuing inquiry in the certainty that they possess absolute and final truth. Such certainty, such insistence that all who count themselves as followers of Christ “walk in lockstep and wear a theological uniform” is problematic at two points. Some of us in all honesty cannot abandon our questions and submit to a one-size-fits-all indoctrination of the Christian faith. Our daily walk confronts us with questions we cannot with integrity avoid and we struggle for understanding. We struggle not because it’s all somehow a game, a contest, but because the issues of faith and an open, honest faith are of critical importance to us.

Furthermore, we struggle, we seek to remain open because we do not want to settle for a lesser faith, a substitute faith that simply pronounces blessing upon what we have always believed or always wanted to believe. “Beware,” the scholars warn us, “of finding a Jesus entirely congenial to you.” Beware, they warn, of the Jesus of convenience that nicely serves your purposes and the purposes of the world that surrounds you. The effort to get to, to fully comprehend “the forgotten Jesus” is a task that is ever beyond us. It is the journey of a lifetime, a journey into which we along with the faithful of every age are invited.

Coming to the end of his monumental *Quest for the Historical Jesus*, Albert Schweitzer sums up his frustration with the 130 year quest for the historical Jesus that had preceded him. Denigrating the extent to which the efforts of those years had produced little more than a “modernized” Jesus, enfeebled and robbed of vigor, Schweitzer reminded all who would listen of the ever mysterious way in which Jesus comes to us and the lifelong journey involved in knowing who he is:

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake side, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: “Follow thou me!” and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is [Quest for the Historical Jesus, 403].

Our best energies—a lifelong journey into knowing—an ineffable mystery. Only then do we begin to

know who he is. So it has always been. So it is even now.