

Who do you say that I am?

Preaching Jesus Today

The Revd Canon Dr Nigel Leaves

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The iconic question that St Mark attributes to Jesus – ‘Who do you say that I am?’ (Mark 8: 29) – is as relevant today as it was two thousand years ago, especially for the majority of us here at this ‘Common Dreams’ conference who in some way or another are still ‘followers of Jesus.’ In this lecture, I will attempt to reply to Mark’s question with reference to four recent books about Jesus that in my view reflect the agenda for what I shall term ‘today’s Jesus context’. These texts both encapsulate the current debate about Jesus and provide appropriate source material from which to formulate a tentative answer to how we might preach Jesus today. In particular, I will show how these books bring into sharp relief four important ‘Jesus themes’ that preachers must deal with whenever they undertake either a personal or a homiletic answer to ‘Who do you say that I am?’

THE JESUS CONTEXT

The first of the four books, Bart Ehrman’s *Did Jesus Exist?* (2012), was a response to the recent resurgence of ‘mythicist’ arguments that Jesus was a literary creation rather than an historical person. This issue was stirred up by scholars such as Tom Harpur, D. M. Murdoch, Robert M. Price, and Earl Doherty; it was fueled by the short-lived and now defunct *Jesus Project* (Chaired by R. Joseph Hoffman) and further backed by antagonists such as the *American Humanist Association* and ‘the New Atheists,’ especially Richard

Carrier.¹ Whilst Ehrman declares himself to be theologically ‘agnostic’ and generally skeptical about much of the historicity of the New Testament – a position made clear in a series of excellent books about the transmission and contradictions of the scriptural texts² – he surprised many by asserting that ‘there certainly was a Jesus of Nazareth who existed in history, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and about whom we can say a good deal as a historical figure.’² This stance not only disappointed the ‘mythicists’ who thought that they had an ally in debunking the historical authenticity of Jesus, but also riled his former evangelical colleagues at Moody Bible College because of his insistence that the real historical Jesus was not the same as the Jesus that they were preaching! For like Albert Schweitzer he argues in *Jesus, Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (OUP, 2001) that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet who thought that God would send the cosmic ‘son of man’ to establish God’s empire here on earth after his crucifixion. In short, Jesus might have been mistaken, but he was definitely an historical person. Ehrman cleverly courted controversy by attacking the mythicists, appearing conservative in his defense of the historicity of Jesus, and at the same time promoting a Jesus completely unacceptable to those who might wish to utilize his arguments. Quite a lesson in how to promote and sell a book!

This year Polebridge Press launched Joe Bessler’s, *A Scandalous Jesus* (2013), in which he argues that the three ‘Quests for the Historical Jesus’, far from being dry academic pursuits, altered the way that people thought about the Christian faith. In his view ‘historical

¹ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 332-334. Tom Harpur, *The Pagan Christ* (2004) Robert M. Price, *The Christ Myth Theory and Its Problems* (2012), Earl Doherty, *Jesus neither God Nor Man* (2009 2nd Ed.); D. M. Murdoch (Acharya), *The Christ Conspiracy: the greatest story ever told* (1990). *The Jesus Project* was initiated by R. Joseph Hoffmann and was conducted by the Secular Centre for Inquiry. However, it disbanded after two years due to internal wranglings between scholars and a major dispute between Hoffmann and Paul Kurtz. Hoffmann still has aspirations to recommence the project under the auspices of *The Jesus Prospect* but so far very little seems to have materialized. Richard Carrier’s (continuing) response to Ehrman can be followed at <http://freethoughtblogs.com/carrier/archives/category/bart-ehrman>.

² Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 335.

Jesus research' should be embraced by Christians because it is a 'space in which new models of faith are glimpsed' – and importantly for us for at this conference 'lived both within and beyond the boundaries of tradition.'³ And because their findings have entered the public discourse, the three Quests have affected both the Churches and the general populace. Who Jesus was now affects *everyone!* Schweitzer's Jesus, Bultmann's Jesus, Kasemann's Jesus, Funk's Jesus – and perhaps the local preacher's Jesus – cry out for a 're-imagining of Faith'.⁴ These quests have made Jesus 'scandalous' not only because ecclesiastical authorities did not wish him to be unearthed, but also because the debate about who Jesus might have been is now an open forum.

The third book, Robin Meyers' *Saving Jesus from the Church* (2009), has been championed by Christian liberals/progressives as an outline of the new Christian path. Assuming the mantle of John Shelby Spong, Meyers is a fresh voice and his book a rhetorical re-enfleshment of *A New Christianity for a New World*. He outlines an understanding of the faith that is not ordered 'around the axis of sin and salvation' but rather a 'search for meaning in a world that is often meaningless'.⁵ Jesus is more a teacher than a Savior, and instead of arguing about outdated Christian metaphysics and doctrines, Christians must follow his essential teachings. In short, Christianity is about 'being, not belief'.⁶

Last, but hardly least, Random Press hit the jackpot last month with Reza Aslan's latest offering, *Zealot*, which overnight rocketed to the top of the *New York Times*' bestseller list. To be sure, one cannot overlook the contribution of Lauren Green, *Fox News* Religion correspondent, who provided extraordinary publicity for the book by announcing her incredulity that a Muslim could write about the 'founder of Christianity', Nonetheless,

³ Bessler, *A Scandalous Jesus*, 226.

⁴ Bessler, *A Scandalous Jesus*, chap. 12.

⁵ Meyers, *Saving Jesus From the Church*, 7.

⁶ Meyers, *Saving Jesus From the Church*, chap. 2.

Aslan's thesis that Jesus was a nationalist zealot (without a capital 'Z')⁷ fiercely opposed to the Roman occupation can claim a degree of validity despite its exaggerated nature.

Relying on John P. Meier's assertion that Jesus was 'a marginal Jewish peasant from the backwoods of Galilee'⁸ Aslan presents Jesus as one of many Jewish messianic pretenders of that era whose political message opposing Roman imperial rule unsurprisingly led to his death by crucifixion. It was left to Paul (in opposition to James 'the Just', brother of Jesus) to preach another 'Gospel,' one that transformed Jewish nationalist aspirations into a religion for non-Jews and focused on belief in Jesus as the long-awaited Savior of the whole world.⁹ With the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, the 'ethnic cleansing' at Masada, and the dispersion of Jewish communities, the Pauline religious outlook gained control and was echoed in the later proclamations of Matthew, Luke, and especially John. The long march from Jesus of Nazareth to Jesus 'begotten not made' and the Nicean Creed had begun.

In many ways Aslan's thesis is a remixing of S.G.F. Brandon's ground-breaking *Jesus and the Zealots: a study of the political factor in primitive Christianity* (1967) and (the late) Geza Vermes' portrait of Jesus as charismatic Jew. In response to Lauren Green it might be pointed out that both Vermes, a Jew who became a Christian who reconverted to Judaism, and Aslan, a Muslim who became a Christian who reconverted to Islam, discovered the same sort of Jewish Jesus. [Go figure!] Moreover, as my colleague Greg Jenks has perceptively observed, the content of Aslan's book can be summed up in its subtitle: 'the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth'. Aslan's concern is to uncover the social and religious milieu of Palestine when Jesus was alive. This is exactly the approach of Brandon and Vermes. The question that needs to be more carefully addressed is whether Jesus advocated the path of revolution or

⁷ The Zealot party arose thirty years after the death of Jesus and was most active in resisting Rome between 69 and 81CE.

⁸ Aslan, *Zealot*, 219

⁹ Aslan, *Zealot*, chap. 15.

preached a message quite different from the prevailing *sitz im leben*? Again, the reception to the book's claims show a continuing interest in who was Jesus?

FOUR JESUS THEMES ARISING FROM THESE BOOKS

These four books bring into focus the contemporary debate about Jesus. In particular they highlight four themes that I consider vital for preachers to address when they undertake the weekly gig in the pulpit. Karl Barth is widely credited with the remark that the preacher needs to have the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other.¹⁰ Today, of course, 'newspaper' is a figure of speech for the many social media that disseminate, dissect, and discuss the latest ideas from books. Unlike her predecessor, the modern preacher has more than a tabloid headline or a controversial editorial with which to engage. People are constantly surfing the web, Face booking, Twittering, and e-mailing each other on every topic under the sun, including ideas about Jesus. Unfortunately, many churches seem to operate under the assumption that congregations leave their 'virtual' world behind them; but people sitting in church pews, like the audience in front of me, have smart-phones, i-pads, laptops and the like that are 'Google-ready' waiting to check up on the speaker's facts and conclusions.

So, what are the four themes?

1. Jesus in the public domain and the challenge of the new atheists
2. The many diverse portraits of Jesus
3. The historical Jesus
4. The impact that preaching the historical Jesus would have on the church today

¹⁰ There is no record of Barth actually writing this. The alleged comment comes from a *Time* Magazine piece on Barth published on May 31, 1963: '[Barth] recalls that 40 years ago he advised young theologians 'to take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.' The implication for Barth was that the Bible's authority was greater than the newspaper's. The popular saying lessens the force of Barth's original meaning.

1. JESUS IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN AND THE NEW ATHEISTS

The popularity of all four books makes it clear that Jesus is being discussed in the public domain, a fact nowhere better revealed than in the recent concern of atheists in trying to prove that Jesus didn't exist. Ehrman wonders why mythicists would spend so much time in this endeavor, and answers that it is part of their agenda to undermine belief in God. If it can be proved that Jesus never existed, then the religious house of cards, which depends on belief in God, will come crashing down. As he says: "their agenda is religious, and they are complicit in religious ideology. They are not doing history: they are doing theology."¹¹

The implication, of course, is that whereas some Christians proclaim Jesus to be God, if you can prove he wasn't even a human being, then belief in God will vanish. Obviously, that argument fails on two accounts. First, whether God exists is not dependent on *a priori* belief that Jesus exists, for Jesus and God are not necessarily interdependent. Second, the variations in ideas on the relationship between Jesus and God are legion, extending from the full-blown Chalcedonian definition to John Hick's *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* to Don Cupitt's Jesus the philosopher and a non-realist god.¹² What people say about Jesus might or *might not* lead them to God.

Moreover, for Ehrman the crucial point is not whether God exists but what kind of Jesus you preach. He is convinced that the atheists would do better to accept that Jesus did exist and attack Christianity with the portrait of a 'too historical' Jesus who wrongly believed that God would soon intervene and establish a future theocracy. Challenging Christians on their 'false', interpretations of Jesus would prove a far more effective tactic than disputing his

¹¹ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 338.

¹² Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*; Cupitt, *Jesus and Philosophy*.

historicity. As Schweitzer famously put it: “it is good that the true historical Jesus should overthrow the modern Jesus.”¹³

This leads to the second and perhaps the most fascinating of the Jesus themes that a preacher has to deal with: the many diverse portraits of Jesus – a phenomenon that occurs on two levels that I shall call the ‘visible’ and the ‘invisible.’

2. THE MANY DIVERSE PORTRAITS OF JESUS

The visible level refers to the obvious fact that Jesus has been appropriated by many different Christian communities in diverse cultural settings from the tropical forests of Papua New Guinea to the shanty-towns of Johannesburg and the opulent apartments of Manhattan. He has been championed by some as a socialist ‘liberation’ revolutionary; and by others as a right-wing, gun-toting precursor of Texas Republicans. He has been called pacifist, feminist, Marxist, liberal, conservative, and dozens of other epithets. His name has been invoked to sanction the handling of deadly snakes or swooning as imagined demons are expelled from their bodies. He has been credited with miraculous healings, rescues from every imaginable calamity, and the spiritual salvation of countless individuals. He has been worshipped in hundreds of different rituals – all the way from the pomp and ceremony of a Papal Mass in the Vatican to a rock concert at a Campus Crusade in South Dakota and the wringing of a chicken’s neck in Jamaica. Many Jesuses inhabit the public domain.¹⁴

But there remains the invisible Jesus, the one that the preacher knows about but never declaims from the pulpit. She knows from her seminary studies that multiple representations of Jesus appear not only in the pages of the New Testament but also in countless revered

¹³ Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 403.

¹⁴ Jesus is ‘an existentialist religious thinker, a rabbinic teacher, an apocalyptic prophet, a pious Hasid, a revolutionary peasant, a wandering Cynic, a Greco-Roman magician, a healing witch doctor, a nationalist anti-Temple Galilean revolutionary or a wo/man-identified man.” Fiorenza, *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation*, 6

manuscripts and codices that were omitted, lost or suppressed when the canonical edition was finalized. And only since 1945, after the discovery of the Nag Hammadi collection of thirteen codices, have biblical scholars conceded that the story of Jesus *might* include more than is contained in the canon of the New Testament. In fact, we now recognize the existence of “a *wild diversity* of the early Christian movement during its earliest centuries,” with all parties claiming to “represent the views of Jesus.”¹⁵ As Hedrick correctly notes:

For the first three centuries of the Common Era no generally accepted standards defined the ‘right way’ to be a follower of Jesus—or even whether a right way could be identified among all the different views of him. Diversity of perspective was the rule. The claim that the ‘faith once delivered to the saints’ (Jude 3) was the ‘true’ faith was only one claim for authority among the many competing claims that emerged in the early period.¹⁶

That competition among Christian groups to claim possession of the ‘authentic’ voice of Jesus has changed little in two thousand years. In today’s world Jesus is variously proclaimed by an estimated thirty-nine thousand Christian denominations.¹⁷ In addition, over the centuries he has been diversely represented in art, literature, film, and even secular propaganda.¹⁸ Two examples will suffice.

The most sinister of such representations is the Aryan Jesus. Susannah Heschel’s impressive research shows how from 1939-1945 the ‘Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on the German Church’ attempted to redefine ‘Christianity as a Germanic religion whose founder, Jesus, was no Jew but rather had fought valiantly to destroy Judaism,

¹⁵ Ehrman, *Jesus Interrupted*, 191 (my italics).

¹⁶ Hedrick, *When Faith Meets Reason*, xiii.

¹⁷ The figure of 39,000 (or sometimes 38,000) denominations is quoted in much Christian literature, though is usually not referenced. My source is the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary South Hamilton, MA, USA (see www.gordonconwell.com). However, they list extensive data on only **9,000** Christian denominations.

¹⁸ For a comprehensive overview of how Jesus has been portrayed in celluloid see Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies*.

falling as victim to that struggle.’¹⁹ The institute was funded by the German Christian movement (part of the German Protestant Church) and at its height had a membership of 600,000 pastors, bishops, professors of theology, religion teachers and laity. One should note that the German Christian movement was larger than the Confessing Church, which remained a minority opposition group. Church altars with swastikas, Nazi flags outside churches, and Christians saluting Hitler reinforced the Aryan Jesus.

At the same time on the other side of the Atlantic, Jesus became a ‘rugged,’ ‘strong,’ ‘tanned,’ ‘Western’ and ‘manly’ type in Warner Sallman’s populist painting *The Head of Christ* (1924/1941), copies of which were given to American servicemen as they headed off to fight in the Second World War against Germans! Sallman’s portrait is considered the most popular artistic representation of Jesus, and closest to the way most ‘Western’ people imagine him to have looked!²²

So which of the many depictions of Jesus is most nearly correct?

This leads us to the third theme for the preacher: Who was the historical Jesus?

3. WHO WAS THE HISTORICAL JESUS?

Which portrait of Jesus is closest to the historical person who lived all those years ago in Palestine? What are the implications of historical Jesus research for Christianity? Again, all four books critically engage this research.

I have arrived at the dual conviction that the search for the historical Jesus matters greatly and that we can make a good estimate of who he was. It is of equal importance, I believe, that unless we arrive at a personal assessment of who Jesus was we abandon our own faith quest and become what Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) contemptuously labeled ‘followers of the herd.’

¹⁹ Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus*, 1.

Most New Testament scholars accept the proposition that Jesus' central proclamation concerned the kingdom/empire/realm of God.²⁰ As I observed earlier, since the publication of Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906), the issue of whether it was to be a *future* or *present* empire has become one of the most hotly disputed issues in New Testament studies. The discussion centers on whether Jesus was **either** an apocalyptic/eschatological prophet who thought that the end of the present world order and the arrival of God's empire would shortly follow his death (Schweitzer's own view); **or** whether he was a wisdom teacher who came to call for the establishment of a new and radically inclusive community. This is not some arcane academic argument, for not only does it go to the heart of who Jesus was and the nature of the God he proclaimed, but it is crucial in deciding "what sort of religion Christianity is"²¹ and therefore what we should proclaim today.

I side with those scholars who argue for a sapiential Jesus, a prophetic teacher who announced that God's empire was to be made real *now* by those who accepted his teaching. It was to be experienced as a present reality by those first disciples and to be similarly practiced by subsequent generations. Jesus' theology was thus not dominated by the expectation of an imminent and cataclysmic intervention by God in history, but rather down-to-earth, everyday advice on how God's empire was to be instituted in this world. His unique teaching method of parables and aphorisms marks Jesus as a social revolutionary who founded a short-lived egalitarian community based upon a 'discipleship of equals.' that broke down barriers of race, class, gender and ethnicity.²²

The parables, widely hailed as "the distinctive voice of Jesus," depict an alternative society in which "the empire of God brings everyone to the same level." Such a social

²⁰ 'Realm' and 'empire' are now widely used to avoid the sexist overtones of kingdom.

²¹ Patterson in Miller (ed.), *The Apocalyptic Jesus*, 163.

²² Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza coined the phrase 'discipleship of equals.' Dominic Crossan, Gerd Theissen and The Jesus Seminar view Jesus as a social revolutionary.

structure was antithetical to the officially sanctioned empire of Rome, As a popularly proclaimed rabbi he advocated an alternative “counter-world,” a “shared egalitarianism of spiritual and material resources” that clearly challenged Roman political, economic, and religious domination. This advocacy of “living in relationships of mutual care” is reflected in the ecclesial utopian community portrayed in Acts 4:32–35.²³ Of course, the mere advocacy of such a spiritual and social program by a Mediterranean peasant would have been viewed as seditious by the Roman authorities, and it could lead to only one outcome: arrest for treason followed by crucifixion.

It was his proclamation of this vision of an alternative and thus subversive empire that brought Jesus to the attention of the Roman authorities. And Pontius Pilate, contrary to the Gospel writers’ portrayal of his humane and judicious rule, was in fact a brutal Roman prefect who “unleashed a reign of terror” from 26–36 CE. He had no qualms about ordering the crucifixion of a suspected malefactor on the flimsiest of evidence, and he would surely have dealt in summary fashion with a peasant from Nazareth who proclaimed a rival empire.²⁴

Significantly, Jesus’ message and program of radical inclusivity was *based on his vision of God*. Charles Hedrick connects his theology, his program, and his death in a single concise paragraph:

He believed in God and found in his personal faith a sense of authority for his public acts and discourse. He believed God was working through him to reclaim complete control of human affairs. *When fully realized, God’s imperial rule would bring about a reversal of human values and overhaul the structures of society.* Quite predictably, therefore, Jesus found

²³ I have here summarised the ideas of Bernard Brandon Scott, “The Reappearance of Parables” and John Dominic Crossan, “Jesus as a Mediterranean Jewish peasant” in Hoover (ed.), *Profiles of Jesus*, 19-40, 161-68. Scott and Crossan differ slightly in that Scott argues that Jesus primarily presented a vision or “glimpsed alternative,” whereas Crossan believes that Jesus offered both an alternative vision **and** a concrete social program.

²⁴ Verhoeven, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 26.

his natural place among the poor and irreverent on the margins of society, rather than in its main stream. The “righteous” and the religious authorities were particularly subject to his scathing wit and censure. Likely the reversal of values he announced and its implied challenge to the power structures of human society brought about his death. The fact that he was killed by an official act of the governing authority suggests that his public career was viewed, in some sense, as a serious threat to public welfare.²⁵

How, then, shall we personify the God of Jesus?

Patterson neatly focuses the issue by asking two crucial questions: “What is the character of God that comes to expression in Jesus’ words and deeds? What did Jesus believe to be true about God that led him to speak of God’s empire in the way that he did?”²⁶ Clearly, the answers we give to these questions will determine not only the kind of God that we believe in, but also the type of Christianity that we seek to advance and preach today.

First, Patterson argues, Jesus’ words and deeds reflected a belief that “God is not remote but directly involved in the lives of ordinary people.” God is known in the midst of life, can be addressed intimately, and welcomes *all* into his family. There are no outsiders, no expendables, and no one is unclean. Further, “the experience of God is transformative and leads to new acts of love directed towards others.” Thus “God calls persons into relationships of radical love and mutual care.”²⁷

Second, Jesus’ words and deeds manifested an inclusive God who invites us to form communities in which the experience of love and care would be institutionalized where, in the words of a modern hymn “people matter, people count.”²⁸ This is the empire of God. Patterson concludes his disquisition with this insightful observation:

What people experienced in Jesus was a word of love,
acceptance, belonging, and value. Jesus spoke about God in just

²⁵ Hedrick ‘Jesus of Nazareth’ in Hoover (ed.), *Profiles of Jesus*, 71 (my italics).

²⁶ Patterson, *The God of Jesus*, 113.

²⁷ Patterson, *The God of Jesus*

²⁸ ‘Sing we of a modern city’ (1968) by Frederek Hermanus Kaan (1929–2009).

these terms. So when people heard his words and believed them to be true, their experience became not just that of a remarkable teacher. They experienced his words as the Word of God. This was the beginning of the Christian understanding of who God is. It began with the theology of Jesus himself.²⁹

It is from this understanding of Jesus' theology that Christians proclaim their faith.

This, of course, leads us to the fourth theme.

4. PREACHING THE HISTORICAL JESUS IN THE CHURCH TODAY

Both as a scholar and a Christian minister who values community, I have become aware of an increasing demand by the laity that their clergy be not only up to date in their biblical scholarship, but also able to foster the growth of communities where religious ideas can be discussed openly. The caricature of the layperson, who has 'a simple faith' is a distortion that must be expunged. Faith is not 'simple' today, nor was it in the past. IT NEVER HAS BEEN. True faith is a roller-coaster experience that continually questions, doubts and inquires. At the heart of such an exploration lie questions about the Jesus who lived two thousand years ago: "Who was he?" "What did he really teach?" "In what sense was he unique?"

Any Christian who denies being more than a little curious about these issues is either dishonest or unwilling to address one of the most important components of his or her faith. Such an excuse is sometimes encountered amongst candidates for the ministry who, having to undertake a course on Christology as a prerequisite for ordination, encounter a 'crisis of faith' when confronted with various portraits of Jesus and find that none match their own. As one who teaches such a course I continually ask myself why this awareness has not been absorbed at the church level before these putative seekers are invited to begin their ministerial

²⁹ Patterson, *The God of Jesus*, 118.

formation? Why do the churches fail to educate their congregations in basic Biblical criticism?

At the root of this conspiracy of silence is fear of the effects of biblical criticism, but any program of theological education, whether in church school or seminary, demands some knowledge of historical criticism. The evangelical theologian Kenton Sparks neatly sketches the paradox of biblical criticism:

If biblical criticism leads to false and destructive results, and if it is indeed as intellectually bankrupt as some conservative theologians aver, then why have so many thoughtful believers entered university graduate programs with a vibrant devotion to God only to emerge on the other side of their studies with a dead or failing faith, and with the firm conviction that historical criticism easily bests the traditional viewpoint? Do Christian graduate students succumb to the deceptive power of university professors? Are they easily swayed to sacrifice their faith on the altar of academic respectability? Is hubris so endemic to academic inquiry that most graduate students—even Christian graduate students—arrogantly use critical scholarship to escape God’s claim on their lives? Perhaps. But even if these questions direct our attention to important issues, there are other questions worth asking, questions that traditionalists sometimes overlook. Is it possible that the persuasive power of historical criticism rests especially in its correctness? Could it be that historical criticism—like the astronomy of Galileo—has been destructive, not because it is false, but because the church has often misunderstood its implications? If so, then we may eventually have to face a tragic paradox: the church’s wholesale rejection of historical criticism has begotten the irreverent use of Scripture by skeptics thus destroying the faith of some believers while keeping unbelievers away from the faith. If this is indeed what has happened and is happening, then nothing less is needed than the church’s careful reevaluation of its relationship to historical-critical readings of Scripture.³⁰

I have quoted this passage at length because it is often supposed that most evangelical Christians are hostile to historical and critical research. Sparks is part of a growing group of voices *within* the evangelical tradition that openly admit the compatibility of a reverence

³⁰ Sparks, *God’s Word in Human Words*, 20.

for Scripture and biblical criticism. He pleads for his fellow evangelicals and their churches to take seriously the results of historical and textual criticism. He calls for ‘believing criticism’ in which ministers openly admit that Scripture has historical inaccuracies, false scientific claims, and ethical contradictions.

Such admissions would avoid the cognitive dissonance that biblical scholars of every persuasion experience when “their carefully considered, private scholarly conclusions no longer fit into the old fundamentalistic wineskins demanded by their institutions.”³¹ Beyond this question, much is at stake in the evaluation of historical critical research. At the heart of the predicament is the inter-relationship between history, faith, and the Church. Tyron Inbody neatly explains the situation:

Christology is not simply a historical memory of Jesus; it is the interpretation of his significance and the grounds and nature of his significance for Christian faith and life. There can be no Christology apart from the faith of the believer. Yet the faith of the church is tied intimately to the historical person of the first century. Although Christology is about why and what one recalls about Jesus for the life of faith, that faith is inseparable from the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth.³²

In other words, what is taken to be true about Jesus (Christology) is related to what both the individual believer and the church proclaim about him. Yet what is proclaimed must rest on a credible historical basis, for otherwise Christians and the Church commit intellectual dishonesty that can have disastrous consequences:

If we can indeed “recover” a message that more accurately represents Jesus as a teacher of wisdom and discipleship as a process of imitation, not conversion.... [f]or example, if one believes that Jesus rejected a politics of purity for a politics of compassion, then anti-gay forces in the church today must be subject to the critique not only of ‘liberals’ but of the gospel itself.³³

³¹ Sparks, *God’s Word in Human Words*, 369.

³² Inbody, *The Many Faces of Christology*, 9-10.

³³ Meyers, *Saving Jesus From the Church*, 137.

CONCLUSION

In this lecture I have argued that the four Jesus themes raised by the four books under consideration go to the heart of the contemporary fascination with Jesus and also challenge contemporary preachers to offer their congregations a credible Jesus. It is obvious that even people without specific religious beliefs still need ‘community’ – one need only note the growing number of ‘atheist churches’ that have sprung up in America and recently here in Australia. Diana Butler Bass makes the apposite observation in *Christianity After Religion* that historically the Church has emphasized the following hierarchy of ‘order’: believing first, then behaving and finally belonging. She argues that today amongst those she calls ‘spiritual people’ a ‘great reversal’ has reordered those priorities to read: belonging, behaving and believing. After all, belonging is what people need most and recalls how Christianity originated:

It (Christianity) began with an invitation into friendship, into creating a new community, into forming relationships based on love and service.³⁴

Progressive Christians have developed an alternative approach founded upon the revolutionary message of Jesus, whose spiritual and social program was to create communities embodying that vision. Indeed, as Marcus Borg reminds us, the ideal of a loving, inclusive community is at the core of the biblical narrative:

Community is utterly central in the Hebrew Bible and early Christianity. An individualistic spirituality is quite foreign to the biblical vision of life with God. In its worship and practices, the community celebrates life with God, nourishes and mediates the new way of being, and embodies the egalitarian social vision running through the Bible from exodus through the Jesus movement and evident in early Christianity. Christian life in community is meant to create an alternative world, a counter-world, to the world of normalcy and domination.³⁵

³⁴ Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 205.

³⁵ Borg in Miller (ed.), *The Apocalyptic Jesus*, 156

The role and mission of the Christian community is to live up to that vision of a transformed world that Jesus came to proclaim. One useful ‘progressive’ Christian manifesto is that given by Robin Meyers:

I dedicate this book (lecture) to all the men and women who have chosen the parish ministry as their life’s work, and yet who do not wish to be considered harmless artifacts from another age. May all those who labor in the most misunderstood, dangerous and sublime of all professions be encouraged and inspired by the possibility that one’s head and one’s heart can be equal partners in faith. Lest the church end up as a museum piece whose clergy are affable but laughable cartoons, we must once again dedicate ourselves to this wild calling—one that led us away from more comfortable lives and into the only profession where radical truth-telling is part of the job description. May we fear no **one** and no creed, save our own timidity, and may we encourage and support one another in pursuit of religion that is biblically responsible, intellectually honest, emotionally satisfying, and socially significant.³⁶

ADDENDUM

Originally, that was where I intended to finish this lecture. But as I was smoothing out the lumps in the final manuscript, I happened upon an opinion piece that neatly summarizes what I have been attempting to say about the preacher’s task in the modern world. Moreover, it further attests that what contemporary young Christians most desire from a church is not a belief system, but rather an ‘open space’ where they can ask ‘tough questions’ and ‘wrestle with doubt’. Interestingly, the writer’s focus is on a Jesus who is not to be found in most churches, and that is why she and others are leaving. And not only does she prove that people *are still* looking for Jesus, but even more intriguingly, the writer represents the evangelical tradition longing for a church that doesn’t change in style but rather in substance. Isn’t that what most of us here at this conference want too?

³⁶ Meyers, *Saving Jesus from the Church*, dedication page.

In the words of the sage from Galilee: “Let those who have ears listen...”

Why Millennials (b. 1980-2000) are leaving the Church

Opinion by **Rachel Held Evans**, Special to CNN

“At 32, I barely qualify as a millennial.

I wrote my first essay with a pen and paper, but by the time I graduated from college, I owned a cell phone and used Google as a verb.

I still remember the home phone numbers of my old high school friends, but don’t ask me to recite my husband’s without checking my contacts first.

I own mix tapes that include selections from Nirvana and Pearl Jam, but I’ve never planned a trip without Travelocity.

Despite having one foot in Generation X, I tend to identify most strongly with the attitudes and the ethos of the millennial generation, and because of this, I’m often asked to speak to my fellow evangelical leaders about why millennials are leaving the church.

Armed with the latest surveys, along with personal testimonies from friends and readers, I explain how young adults perceive evangelical Christianity to be too political, too exclusive, old-fashioned, unconcerned with social justice and hostile to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

I point to research that shows young evangelicals often feel they have to choose between their intellectual integrity and their faith, between science and Christianity, between compassion and holiness.

I talk about how the evangelical obsession with sex can make Christian living seem like little more than sticking to a list of rules, and how millennials long for faith communities in which they are safe asking tough questions and wrestling with doubt.

Invariably, after I’ve finished my presentation and opened the floor to questions, a pastor raises his hand and says, “So what you’re saying is we need hipper worship bands. ...”

And I proceed to bang my head against the podium.

Time and again, the assumption among Christian leaders, and evangelical leaders in particular, is that the key to drawing twenty-somethings back to church is simply to make a few style updates – edgier music, more casual services, a coffee shop in the fellowship hall, a pastor who wears skinny jeans, an updated Web site that includes online giving.

But here’s the thing: Having been advertised to our whole lives, we millennials have highly sensitive B(ull) S(h.) meters, and we’re not easily impressed with consumerism or performances.

In fact, I would argue that church-as-performance is just one more thing driving us away from the church, and evangelicalism in particular.

Many of us, myself included, are finding ourselves increasingly drawn to high church traditions – Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, the Episcopal Church, etc. – precisely because the ancient forms of liturgy seem so unpretentious, so unconcerned with being “cool,” and we find that refreshingly authentic.

What millennials really want from the church is not a change in style but a change in substance.

We want an end to the culture wars. We want a truce between science and faith. We want to be known for what we stand for, not what we are against.

We want to ask questions that don't have predetermined answers.

We want churches that emphasize an allegiance to the kingdom of God over an allegiance to a single political party or a single nation.

We want our LGBT friends to feel truly welcome in our faith communities.

We want to be challenged to live lives of holiness, not only when it comes to sex, but also when it comes to living simply, caring for the poor and oppressed, pursuing reconciliation, engaging in creation care and becoming peacemakers.

You can't hand us a latte and then go about business as usual and expect us to stick around. We're not leaving the church because we don't find the cool factor there; **we're leaving the church because we don't find Jesus there.**

Like every generation before ours and every generation after, deep down, we long for Jesus.

Now these trends are obviously true not only for millennials but also for many folks from other generations. Whenever I write about this topic, I hear from forty-somethings and grandmothers, Generation Xers and retirees, who send me messages in all caps that read “ME TOO!” So I don't want to portray the divide as wider than it is.

But I would encourage church leaders eager to win millennials back to sit down and really talk with them about what they're looking for and what they would like to contribute to a faith community.

Their answers might surprise you.

Rachel Held Evans is the author of "Evolving in Monkey Town" and "A Year of Biblical Womanhood." She blogs at rachelheldevans.com.

<http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2013/07/27/why-millennials-are-leaving-the-church/#comments>

The Revd Canon Dr Nigel Leaves is Canon of St John's Cathedral, Brisbane; Associate Priest at Sandgate-Northpont; Adjunct Lecturer at Charles Sturt University.

