

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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Blackballing Jesus

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We read in *Matthew* 16 that Jesus asked the question of some of his disciples, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man am?"

They responded, "Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." But none of these is correct. Rather, it was Peter who received the encomium from his Master, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in Heaven," after the apostle had responded, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."

On another occasion, which we read about in *John* 5, Jesus was teaching his disciples some "hard truths," such as divine election and the need for rigorous commitment to his teachings. Some of those present did not like what he had to say; hence, "they went back and walked with him no more." When Jesus asked the twelve "Do you also want to go away?" again it was Peter who responded, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

What is it that caused some to walk away from Christ's words while others confessed them as true? Jesus gives us the answer: "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me... [but] No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him." For two thousand years now people have reacted differently to the teachings of Christ. On the one hand, by God's grace the elect have responded with Peter. On the other hand, the non-elect have answered in

various ways. Some have said that he is a good teacher, even one of the prophets, but nothing more; others have been less kind, calling him a laconic sage, a charlatan, a man among men. The fact of the matter is that just like those we read about in *John* 6, this latter group has not liked what Jesus had to say.

In the nineteenth century Ernest Renan, David Strauss, and others were instrumental in initiating the movement that has come to be known as "the quest for the historical Jesus." These scholars, not believing that the Gospels give us an accurate account of the real teachings of Christ (*i.e.*, not liking what Christ has to say in the Gospels), thought it necessary to get behind the text of Scripture, a text filled with myth, folklore, and the like, and find the historical Jesus. Increasingly, the "real Jesus" was depicted as a good Rabbi and teacher of spiritual principles, but certainly not the Second Person of the Trinity. Interestingly, it was the liberal Albert Schweitzer who took the steam out of this movement when he wrote his now famous *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1964). Schweitzer demonstrated that the historical Jesus, as formulated by these earlier scholars, is simply a product of their modernist presuppositions. One cannot separate the historical Jesus from the Jesus of the Gospels. Rudolf Bultmann and his followers, using "form criticism," revived the "quest" in the middle of the twentieth century. Now, however, at the end of the

twentieth century, it has reached new levels of arrogance.

In 1985 some thirty scholars of the higher critical school, headed by Robert W. Funk, formed what is known as the Jesus Seminar. The purpose of this alliance was to resurrect the search for the historical Jesus. This group of "Fellows" is composed of both men and women of different faiths (e.g., Jews, Catholics, Protestants, and atheists), all of whom possess high academic credentials. At one time the group consisted of more than 200, but the number has dwindled to 74. The "Fellows" began by collecting the more than 1500 sayings attributed to Jesus over the first three centuries of the Christian era. The sayings were then put to a vote to determine which are authentic and which are not. Four categories were posited, and beads were used to determine into which category these sayings would fall: a red bead was used if the saying was certainly that of Jesus; a pink bead was used if it was probably Jesus' saying; a gray bead was used for a saying that was not attributable to Christ, but the ideas found in it were close to His own; and a black bead was used for sayings that were definitely not Christ's – they belonged to other persons or to "tradition." Just as some fraternities cast white balls or black balls to decide whether or not a new candidate (or "pledge") is worthy of becoming a member or not, so these "Fellows" are actually redballing, pinkballing, grayballing, and blackballing Jesus.

What were the stated criteria of these decisions? The "Fellows" had several: Jesus himself never claimed to be the Messiah, the Gospel writers frequently attributed their statements to Jesus (the same is true of the early Christian community with its tradition), Jesus primarily spoke in aphorisms (short, pithy sayings) and parables, Jesus seldom spoke about himself in the first person (thus blackballing all of the "I am" sayings found in the *Gospel of John*), Jesus' sayings always cut against the social and religious grain, and so forth. None of these can be substantiated, *i.e.*, none is Biblically based.

For the "Fellows," of course, divine inspiration is not even worthy of consideration. All of Jesus'

words are to be considered inauthentic until proven otherwise. What we have here is presuppositional skepticism. And despite the "Fellows" claim of objectivity, it is readily apparent that their judgments are entirely subjective. As Bromling points out, "in each case, personal conviction is the deciding factor (Bromling, 85-86)." Here we have arrogance at a new level. Mankind (or should I say personkind?) determining what is and what is not the teaching of the Lord of glory, their "pledge," by their own criteria. One can almost hear the derisive laughter of Screwtape and his myrmidon Wormwood.

The result of the findings of these fine "Fellows" has now been published in the book *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*. The naturalistic bias of the authors is obvious from the earliest pages. The book is dedicated to Galileo Galilei, "who altered our view of the heavens forever," to Thomas Jefferson, "who took scissors and paste to the gospels," and to David Strauss, "who pioneered the quest of the historical Jesus." Then too, the authors state that "the Christ of creed and dogma, who had been firmly in place in the Middle Ages, can no longer command the assent of those who have seen the heavens through Galileo's telescope. The old deities and demons were swept away from the skies by that remarkable glass. Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo have dismantled the mythological abodes of the gods and Satan, and bequeathed us secular heavens."

Carson is correct: The authors give us five Gospels, but "No Christ." It is reported, for example, that the Jesus Seminar intends on making a movie in which Christ is portrayed as "fully human." Among other things, this means that he was not virgin born, nor was he resurrected from the dead. The director of the movie will undoubtedly be Hollywood film director Paul Verhoeven, who is one of the "Fellows."

The Five Gospels contains a summary of the philosophical agenda of the Jesus Seminar (which, as noted, is naturalistic and empirically based), a commentary on the passages attributed to Jesus, and the authors' color-coded translation of the five Gospels: *Mark, Matthew, Luke, John*, and the

apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas* (in this order). Incredibly, this translation is known as "The Scholar's Version." Although it is referred to as a translation, it is really a very rough, and sometimes crude, paraphrase. For example, *Matthew 23:13* is rendered: "You scholars and Pharisees, you imposters! Damn you! You slam the door of Heaven's domain in people's faces. You yourselves don't enter, and you block the way of those trying to enter." (I can hardly help but wonder how many of those who follow the teachings of these 74 "scholars" will have the door of Heaven's domain slammed in their faces.) Of the five Gospels, the "Fellows" give highest priority to the apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas*. It is a collection of 114 short, pithy, wisdom sayings which are ascribed to Jesus. This is why the "Fellows" consider it to be the oldest of the Gospels. As noted, they are convinced that Jesus, whom they refer to as the "laconic sage," predominantly used aphorisms. (If wisdom comes in such maxims, one wonders about the wisdom of writing or reading the 550-page book, *The Five Gospels*.)

Conservative scholars have an altogether different view of the *Gospel of Thomas*. First, it is pseudepigraphal (*i.e.*, bearing a false name). Second, this *Gospel* is usually dated in the early second century, and is recognized as highly influenced by Gnostic teachings. It contains fanciful stories of Jesus in his childhood years, stories which are not in accord with what we read about Jesus in the four canonical *Gospels*. Along with the *Gospel of Thomas*, the "Fellows" give high priority to the *Q* document ("*Q*" is taken from the first letter of the German *Quelle*, meaning *source*). In the nineteenth century the higher critical school in Germany theorized that Matthew and Luke used a common source, or collection of pithy sayings, along with Mark as they penned their *Gospels*. The title "*Q*" was given to this source. *Q*, said the higher critics, is surely the oldest compilation of sayings to which we have access. Although conservative scholars do not deny that there were sources of material to which the *Gospel* writers had access (see *Luke 1:1-4*), what they do deny is that these sources themselves were inspired by God. Further, Orthodoxy maintains that when the *Gospel* writers employed the sources, they did so under the

inspiration of the Holy Spirit. As Peter says, "holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (*2 Peter 1:21*). Luke used only what was true in his sources. One of the things that makes orthodox scholars skeptical about the *Q* document is that no evidence for it has ever been found. It seems strange to ascribe such authority to an imaginary document, does it not?

The Jesus Seminar gave privileged status to the *Gospel of Thomas* and relegated the four canonical *Gospels* to a lower level. First, they say, we need to understand that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the disciples of Christ, are not the actual authors of these *Gospels*; these too are pseudepigraphal. Second, none of these four was written prior to the fall of Jerusalem in a.d. 70, as is traditionally maintained (at least with regard to the synoptics, *i.e.*, *Matthew*, *Mark*, and *Luke*). Third, of the four, John's *Gospel* is the most highly suspect.

When the "Fellows" completed their voting, only about 18 percent of what the canonical *Gospel* writers ascribe to the teachings of Christ are deemed authentic (and some of these are questionable). The other 82 percent are gray or blackballed. (Perhaps instead of gray beads, more "gray matter" should have been used.) With regard to the synoptics, *Matthew* and *Luke* contain the greatest amount of Jesus' sayings. The reason: Much of the *Q* document is alleged to be found in them. Red-bead status is given to "turn the other cheek" (*Matthew 5:39; Luke 6:29*), "congratulations, you poor... you hungry... you who weep now" (*Luke 6:30*), and (of course) "love your enemies" (*Luke 6:27*). Some parables are also red-bead quality: the Laborers in the Vineyard, except for the final verse (*Matthew 20:1-16*), the Good Samaritan (*Luke 10:30-35*), and the Shrewd Manager (*Luke 16:1-8a*).

Some of Jesus' sayings, such as the Lord's Prayer of *Matthew 6:9-13*, consist of red, pink, gray, and black beads. And the well known Golden Rule passage of *Matthew 7:12*: "Treat people in ways you want them to treat you," is relegated to gray bead status. Why so? Because, we are told, the real Jesus would more likely have said: "Treat people in the way they want to be treated." In *Mark*, the earliest of the canonical *Gospels*, only one saying is

granted red-bead status: "Pay the emperor what belongs to the emperor and God what belongs to God" (*Mark* 12:17). We are, however, thankful to learn that *Mark* does contain almost 20 pinkbead sayings. John's *Gospel*, I am afraid, does not fare well either. You see, it does not contain many short sayings. And we have been assured that Jesus spoke in short sayings. (Heaven forbid that the laconic sage would ever have preached a long sermon.) So in the entire *Gospel* there are no red-bead passages; only two statements are worthy of gray beads (12:24, 25; 13:20); and the only passage that rates a pink bead is 4:44: "A prophet gets no respect on his own turf."

Conclusion

Just as it was in the first century so it still is – some don't like what Jesus has to say, while others do. Some reject the Word of God, while others believe. Faith is the gift of God: "Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in Heaven.... No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him." God is sovereign over the eternal destinies of all men. And in his good purposes he chooses to draw men to himself by means of his Word. When all is said and done, it comes down to one's belief in the veracity of Scripture: Who is its author? Is it or is it not the infallible, inerrant Word of God? The Jesus Seminar answers the question in the negative: They have blackballed Jesus. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1:4), on the other hand, answers the question this way: "The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, depends not upon the testimony of any man or church, but wholly upon God (who is truth itself), the author thereof; and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God."