

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Finding the real Jesus

Although I've been an active churchgoer all my life, I haven't always been sure what to believe about Jesus. Some of what I hear other Christians say about Jesus gives a picture of him that has little resemblance to the picture that I get from the Bible and from my own and others' experience.



Christians have many pictures of Jesus



All Christians evidently want to attract people to Jesus when they speak about him, but some portray him in ways that to me seem inaccurate. I'm afraid some of them needlessly keep people from believing in Jesus and wanting to follow him.

Some Christians portray Jesus as a ghostly being who couldn't possibly do or feel what real people do and feel, yet Christians supposedly believe that he was fully human in addition to being fully divine. Others make him seem like a sticky-sweet, wet-blanket person that few people would want to have around. Still others portray him as a fierce big-brother-is-watching-you dictator whose main concern is persuading everyone to accept a certain set of doctrinal statements, to observe certain religious rituals in the correct way, and to obey a list of rules. To me, these pictures of Jesus seem quite different from what the gospels show.

Looking for new insight

Because I hear Jesus presented in so many different ways, I stay on the lookout for new information and new insight about what Jesus was really like and about what the living Christ really wants from today's Christians.

Who do the crowds say that I am? ...
Who do you say that I am?

(Luke 9:18-20)



The Jesus Seminar

The Jesus Seminar is a group of scholars who look at ancient texts that claim to quote Jesus. Like most other New Testament scholars today, the Seminar members don't consider the gospels strictly historical records. They believe the gospels are a mixture of what Jesus actually said and what Christians later came to believe from their experience of the risen Christ. Seminar members want to determine which is which, because the two sources give somewhat different pictures of Jesus. Both can include truth, though both the press and Christians often falsely accuse Seminar members of denying that.



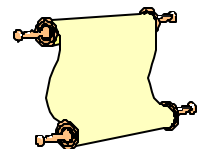
A controversial translation

The Seminar has published a gospel translation that shows in red print what its members feel most certain the earthly Jesus actually said, based on what they find in the earliest manuscripts. The statements that seem most likely to represent later Christians' understanding are shown in black, and the statements whose origin the Seminar members are less sure about are shown in other colors. The Seminar's translation includes the Gospel of Thomas, whose original text is believed to have been written about 200 but wasn't discovered in a complete form until 1945.



Earlier isn't necessarily better

The Seminar's views are often fiercely criticized by traditionalist Christians. However, I can't see any reason to consider the Seminar's views less reliable than those of the Bible scholars and translators who lived in earlier centuries. Today's views may actually be more reliable, because of recently discovered manuscripts and recently developed ways of analyzing ancient manuscripts. And I can't believe that recent views about Jesus are unreliable merely because they're recent. After all, even the earliest of the writings we have about Jesus weren't written until long after his death.



Like the views of all other researchers, the Jesus Seminar's views undoubtedly include both truth and error. Seminar members, like all the rest of us, probably have some less-than-pure motives. But if we really want to follow Jesus, we can't afford to reject Christian biblical scholars' views merely because they differ from what we've always assumed. Their views might be correct.

We're up-to-date, but not about the Bible

It disturbs me that many church members refuse to consider any new information or new insight about Jesus. Instead, these Christians fiercely criticize anyone who dares to suggest that any traditional views of Jesus might be inaccurate or that there might be more to discover about him.

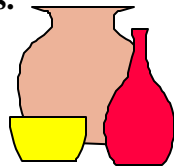


I find this attitude surprising when taken by Christians who in every other part of their life constantly use up-to-date information, ideas, and technology. Few Christians refuse to use the latest medical research findings and technology for their treatment when they get sick. In their daily work they don't refuse to use up-to-date tools, equipment, or methods. But many won't even consider recent findings about Jesus and the Bible.

Why do we refuse new information?

■ We confuse containers with contents.

We confuse God's living word with the human words, religious practices, and other unavoidably restrictive and flawed containers into which it must be put in order to be expressed. We mistakenly worship temporary vessels instead of the timeless treasure that their makers put into them centuries ago. We refuse to use vessels that would best reveal the treasure now.



We have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us.
—2 Corinthians 4:7

■ Our beliefs are shaky, but we're afraid our salvation depends on hanging onto them.

Maybe I'm wrong about this, but to me it looks as if few church members fully believe all that they've been told about Jesus. I don't see many acting as if they really believed it. I think this is partly because we're often given a view of Jesus and the Bible that doesn't seem to match anything else we know, yet we're told that it comes straight from God and that our eternal salvation depends on our believing it. As a result, we hide our uncertainty, even from ourselves. Unfortunately this keeps us from discovering the truth and developing the faith that we yearn for.



■ The real facts about Jesus seem too demanding.

Seeing Jesus as someone who merely went around comforting people and making sweet statements about peace and love is a lot more comfortable than recognizing what love and justice require of us. Assuming that Jesus never had real human feelings or

Beware of finding a Jesus entirely congenial to you.

— a rule used by the

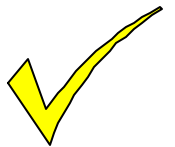
"[God] has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. [God] has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed ..."

—Luke 4:18-19

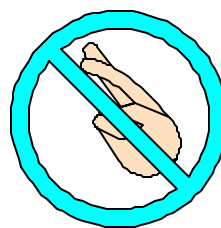
relationships is more comfortable than having to consider the implications of his having them. Telling ourselves that we believe some doctrinal statements is a lot easier than the open-ended job of doing what the real Jesus asks of his followers.

Asking the real questions

In recent years I've finally dared to ask my real questions about Jesus, and to look for answers that can serve as a basis for real faith. It has made a huge difference for me. What a relief it is, no longer to have to try to keep myself convinced that I believe something I really don't find believable! More important, what a relief to have something I *can* honestly believe and can base real faith on.



A believable picture of Jesus



In the past few years I've read the writings of several Christian authors who present a picture of Jesus that I don't have to keep my fingers crossed to accept. One such author is contemporary Christian scholar Marcus Borg, a member of the Jesus Seminar. His recent book *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1994) has become one of my favorites. Another of Borg's books that I like is *Jesus, A New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1987). Both are small paperbacks written in lay language for a general audience.



Borg tells how hard it became for him as an adult to keep accepting the views of Jesus and of Christian discipleship that he was given while he was growing up as an active churchgoer. He describes a long period during which he struggled with doubt and disbelief. "All through this period," he tells us, "I continued to think that believing was what the Christian life was all about. Yet no matter how hard I tried, I was unable to 'do' that, and I wondered how others could."



"Now," Borg says, "I no longer see the Christian life as being primarily about believing."

Beyond belief to relationship

"The Christian life," Borg now realizes, "is about entering into a relationship with that to which the Christian tradition points, which may be spoken of as God, the risen living Christ, or the Spirit."

"My own journey," Borg explains, "has led beyond belief (and beyond doubt and disbelief) to an understanding of the Christian life as a relationship to the Spirit of God—a relationship that involves one in a journey of transformation."

Two ways of seeing Jesus

What has helped Borg to reach this point, he tells us, is recognizing two ways of describing Jesus that are different but are both true. One is what Borg calls the pre-Easter Jesus. By this he means Jesus as a figure of history before his death.

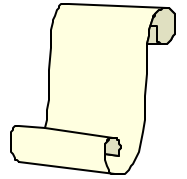


The other, Borg calls the post-Easter Jesus. It is the Jesus of Christian tradition and experience. The experience is crucial, Borg emphasizes. In his view, the post-Easter Jesus is not the product of mistaken beliefs. The post-Easter Jesus is the real Christ who still lives.

The all-important point, which in Borg's view is the central meaning of Easter, is that after Jesus' death the early Christians still experienced him as a living reality, but in a radically new way—as a spiritual reality who was no longer limited by time and space as Jesus of Nazareth had been.

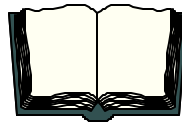


The gospels include some parts that Borg and other scholars do not consider historical accounts of Jesus' life or his sayings, because what these parts say isn't confirmed by any records of the kind that historians consider necessary for verifying events described in the distant past.



History isn't the only source of truth

Critics of the Jesus Seminar members and other biblical scholars interpret the scholars' statements to mean that they are declaring the gospel accounts worthless, but I believe these critics often misrepresent what the scholars are saying. Scriptures can be valuable testimony about the living Christ, without being historical accounts of events in Jesus' earthly life, when the experience of countless Christians throughout twenty centuries repeatedly confirms what those scriptures say.



Discovering the views of some contemporary theologians and scholars, including some members of the Jesus Seminar, has given many Christians their first believable picture of Jesus and has therefore inspired them to follow him. I feel sad when I hear other Christians who have discovered Jesus in a different way arrogantly insist that only their way is valid. I don't believe any of us can legitimately call anyone else's God-given experience worthless.

Knowing about Jesus isn't enough

John Dominic Crossan is another member of the Jesus Seminar whose writings I've found helpful. Like Borg, he emphasizes the importance of experiencing the living Christ in addition to knowing about the historical Jesus. In his book *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (HarperSan Francisco, 1994), Crossan uses an imaginary conversation with Jesus to make this point.

"I've read your book, Dominic," Crossan imagines Jesus saying to him, "and it's quite good. So now you're ready to live by my vision and join me in my program?"

"I don't think I have the courage, Jesus," Crossan replies, "but I did describe it quite well, didn't I . . .?"

"Thank you, Dominic," Jesus says, "for not falsifying the message to suit your own incapacity. That at least is something."

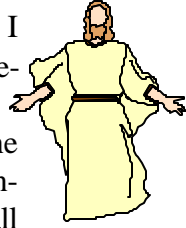
"Is it enough, Jesus?"

"No, Dominic, it is not."



Compassion—the main quality of God?

Marcus Borg grew up thinking, as I did, that being a Christian meant believing a set of doctrines and teachings about Jesus. Now, however, he sees that what really counts is relationship with the living Christ. We don't all find that in exactly the same way, and when we find it, the picture of Jesus it gives us may not be exactly like the picture any other Christian sees.



Borg feels that when we look at the real Jesus we see that compassion—not a demand for any kind of

doctrinal purity—is the dominant quality of God. That's the impression I clearly get, too, when I read the Bible, and I believe we need more of that compassion in the church. We even need to show compassion to our fellow Christians whose experience of the living Christ differs from our own.

Barbara