



THE BEREIA PAGE

“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11

Reflections

“The Bible is not a child’s storybook, but great literature that requires thoughtful response. All its diamonds do not lie exposed on the surface to be picked like flowers. Its richness is mined only through hard intellectual and spiritual spadework.” ~ Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Baker Book House, 1980), 21

“For some years I have been concerned that we in the heritage of the Restoration Movement have to a large degree lost our appreciation of the undenominational plea. Some have frankly abandoned the idea as unworkable while others give it lip service by failing to accept its implications. There is a gap between our teaching and our practice.” ~ Monroe E. Hawley, *Redigging the Wells: Seeking Undenominational Christianity* (Quality Publications, 1976), 7

“Though the Bible seldom uses the word we translate ‘church,’ the Scriptures do make clear that we weren’t made part of the Body of Christ for what we can get out of it.” ~ Marva J. Dawn, *Is It a Lost Cause?* in *Christian Studies* 19 (2003): 82

“Who Is Jesus?” in a World with Many Views

David Anguish

On my shelves is the book, *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*. The cover’s promotional blurb begins:

The scholarly quest of the historical Jesus has a distinguished pedigree in modern Western religious and historical scholarship. . . . Since the early 1990s, when the Jesus quest was reawakened for a third run, numerous significant books have emerged. And the public’s attention has been regularly arrested by media coverage. . . . (Beilby & Eddy 2009).

With essays by Robert Price, John Dominic Crossan, Luke Timothy Johnson, James D. G. Dunn, and Darrell L. Bock, *Five Views* illustrates the variety of opinions in a debate that continues unabated. The question, “who Is Jesus?” is not new, of course; Christian debates and creedal statements in the first four centuries AD revolved around it (see Norris 1980, 1-31). But since we inhabit a world with more popular-level diversity of philosophy and religion than that of our grandparents, it is easy to think we are dealing with something new and be caught off-guard when we find ourselves in conversations where we need to explain why we believe about Jesus as we do.

Thankfully, in seeking resources to respond, it is not necessary to immerse ourselves in the christological debates of the first four centuries. *Who is Jesus?* is precisely the question the Gospels are concerned to answer. In fact, they report that Jesus himself encouraged it (Mark 8.27–29 = Matt 16.13–16; Luke 9.18–20). Leading his disciples north of Galilee to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus began to ask them, “Who do people say that I am?” (v. 27). Their answers are also found in other Gospel texts: John the Baptist (Mark 6.14), Elijah, or one of the prophets (Luke 9.7–8).

But Jesus didn’t stop with a public opinion survey. He made the question personal. “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” (Mark 8.29 NIV). The NIV reflects the emphatic nature of the question in the Greek. Grammatically, the second person plural form λέγετε (*legete*) is sufficient to render the translation, “you say.” But in verse 29, the second person pronoun ὑμεῖς (*hymeis*) is placed in an emphatic position at the beginning of the question (Hooker 1991, 202). The context determines whether the presence of a nominative

“The problem, though, is that it is more and more evident that the preacher stands before a congregation that does not know the content of the Christian faith. Except for a few narratives from the Bible that retain some wider cultural currency—the stories of Adam and Eve, David and Goliath, and the Lukan account of the nativity, for example—the biblical materials have largely faded from the memory of many congregations (there are exceptions to this rule, of course). Moreover, it is not only biblical awareness that has been damaged, but also the capacity to employ theological language. When pressed to describe the most urgent and profound realities of their lives, many now reach more readily for the language of therapy rather than the language of theology. Notions of sin, hope, sacrifice, and *agape* have been edged out by the vocabulary of codependency and self-actualization.”

~ Thomas G. Long “When the Preacher is a Teacher,” *Journal for Preachers* 16, 2 (Lent 1993): 22

“It seems to me (and Heaven knows any honest man can observe this in his own spirit) that human beings are forever trying to evade moral responsibility while God is eternally trying to make them accept it, and thus grow up into being His sons. Because of this human tendency the world of the Bible is bound to be an uncomfortable world. For here God, not man, is the master. Here God speaks and man, if he is wise, will listen with a proper humility.” ~ J. B. Phillips, “Four Prophets,” *The Newborn Christian: 114 Readings* (Collier Books, 1978), 31

personal pronoun with a corresponding verb is intended to indicate emphasis (Wallace 1996, 321-323) and that interpretation is warranted here. In light of the debate around them, Jesus was asking his disciples for *their* answer: “But you—who do you say I am?” (Hooker 1991, 202).

Specific terminology differs today, but the core question is the same: Who was Jesus? Messiah? God incarnate? Lord? Healer? Holy man? Guru? Eschatological prophet? Good teacher? Charismatic teacher whose followers used his story to dupe the masses? To answer, we must begin by establishing the following.

What did Jesus think about himself? That a person claims to be God does not make it so, but it is reasonable to expect that a being worthy of being called God would know he was. So, historically, the absence of a claim by Jesus makes modern affirmations of it more difficult. Its absence would also leave us on shaky theological ground since Scripture says we should never treat God’s name casually or elevate any person or thing to his exalted place.

What did the earliest Christians claim about Jesus? We should interact with, not dismiss, the theses of those who affirm that the exalted views of him developed later. To be rational is to affirm that for which we have adequate evidence (Frye & Levi 1941, 159). So, we must become intimately familiar with the historical record and its nuances and defend only what the evidence will allow.

Awareness that diverse views about Jesus were propagated in the first century should help us in our world where the various proposals are not going to go away. As then, many will think our claim that Jesus was God incarnate is preposterous (cf. 1 Cor 1.18–23). Our response must be to plumb the depths of understanding and follow their example in practicing and commending the defense and confirmation of our conviction and its implications (cf. Luke 12.11; 21.14; Acts 22.1; 24.10; 25.16; 26.1–2; Rom 15.8; 1 Cor 1.6; 9.3; Phil 1.7, 16; Heb 2.3; 1 Pet 3.15).

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