

THE SEARCH FOR THE "REAL" JESUS
FEBRUARY 2, 1986

We are going on a search to find Jesus--the "real" Jesus. I am beginning a sermon series today in search of the "real" Jesus. The series will conclude on Easter with, hopefully, a clearer, more accurate understanding of Jesus. We are going to attempt to weave our way through centuries of conceptions and misconceptions. It will be an exciting search. It is as if we are lost in a cave, with only one small flashlight. There are many turns from which to choose--many theories, conjectures, a variety of pictures of Jesus. There are cobwebs hanging from the ceiling--old out-dated conceptions. There are many rooms. Many times we think we have finally found the oldest room; but, by searching we discover there is another opening, leading to yet an older room. It's like an archaeological dig. Each level opens new discoveries, new vistas; but with more digging, we discover an older culture underneath.

You might ask, "Why do we need to go on a search mission? Don't we have the Bible's record? Don't we have the gospels that tell us about Jesus?" Yes, we do, but they have been read through the eyes of the particular culture in which the viewer lives. The Jesus of history, the Jesus who walked on this earth some 2,000 years ago is covered up by centuries of interpretation. We all wear glasses--the lenses of our science, world-view, and theology. For example, people who believe the world is flat have quite a different picture of the earth than we do.

You might ask, "Why are we trying to find Jesus? I didn't know he was lost." Jesus may not be lost, but the church has often lost sight of Jesus. Look at what has been perpetrated in the name of Jesus, bearing little resemblance to the Jesus of the Bible. Wholesale slaughters of Jews have been committed in the name of Jesus. Blacks, Indians, and women have been held in low esteem and second-class citizenship, even slavery, in the name of Jesus. Children have been sent to fight wars in the name of Jesus. The Jesus of Christianity is a Jesus upon which has been superimposed centuries of Christian theology.

The Jesus of contemporary popular religion is practically an American. I suspect that many Americans picture Jesus with blond hair, blue eyes; a polite, patriotic Republican. Others see Jesus as a long-haired, radical Democrat. Robert Hamerton Kelly, Dean of Stanford Chapel, says it well, "The devil tries to get us to worship an idol." What better way to subvert Christianity than to distort the "real" Jesus. Will the "real" Jesus please stand up?

The search for the "real" Jesus is like the task of restoring an antique piece of furniture. After scraping off layers of old varnish, we discover the original wood, and usually we are surprised to see what the piece looked like originally. Likewise in the search for the "real" Jesus, when we scrape away the cultural biases, when we scrape off the Greek philosophy which dominated Christian theology for centuries, when we scrape away the biases of preachers and scholars, we will find a picture of the original Jesus which might surprise many of us.

We are fortunate in our search, for we are the recipients of generations of research. Archaeology has become a popular enterprise. Israel and the Arab nations are committed to the discovery and preservation of the past.

Extensive archaeological exploration has occurred this century, and archaeologists are still finding new sites which give us a clearer understanding of what life was like in the first and previous centuries.

We are also the recipients of generations of biblical research. Scholars in this century have been devoted to the task of discovering the historical Jesus. It was back in 1906 that Albert Schweitzer shocked biblical scholars with his book, The Quest of the Historical Jesus. Schweitzer was not only a medical missionary to Africa and an accomplished organist, but a biblical scholar as well. He drew this conclusion in his book:

The Jesus of Nazareth who came forward publicly as the Messiah, who preached the ethic of the Kingdom of God, who founded the Kingdom of Heaven upon earth and died to consecrate this work, never had any existence. He is a figure designed by rationalism, endowed with life by liberalism, and clothed by modern theology in an historical garb.

In other words, Schweitzer emphatically stated that the Jesus portrayed by Christianity in 1906 was a Jesus not found in the Bible. Schweitzer was quite controversial, but he did launch a movement that is dedicated to finding the "real" Jesus.

Schweitzer was especially critical of the liberal churches of his day who portrayed Jesus as a teacher. The liberals believed that the Kingdom of God would come upon the earth as persons practiced Jesus' teachings. They believed that Jesus was a simple man with a simple message. This Jesus, Schweitzer said, bears little resemblance to the historical Jesus, who was far from simple.

The conservative or fundamentalist churches of our day who are strong in number and especially vocal on television can also be accused of obscuring the "real" Jesus. As I read their literature and listen occasionally to their preaching, I find them especially interested in Christ's work of salvation and in Christ's second coming; but they pay little attention to the Jesus who walked on this earth. They are more theological than biblical!

You might ask, "Is this search for the "real" Jesus really necessary?" Yes, I believe it is crucial for our faith, for Christianity is an historical religion. We believe God reveals himself not through nature primarily, not through meditation primarily, not by revelation through an exceptionally gifted person or a psychic. We believe God reveals himself primarily through history, through the historical events recorded in the Bible, and supremely and most emphatically through Jesus, a real person who lived in history--not in imagination, or vision, or in a meditation experience; but, in history.

Therefore, we need to find the "real" Jesus because Jesus revealed God as no other person, no other event, has ever done. Albert Nolan in his book, Jesus Before Christianity, makes the surprising statement, "The God of Jesus is quite unlike the God which most Christians worship." (Pg. 79) The crucial task for Christians is to have a clear understanding of the "real" Jesus. Christianity is grounded in the historical Jesus. Otherwise, we are vulnerable to cultural and personal biases. It is critically important to

have an accurate picture of Jesus, for Jesus reveals God to us. Nolan says it this way:

Jesus reveals God to us, God does not reveal Jesus to us...To argue from God to Jesus instead of arguing from Jesus to God is to put the cart before the horse. This, of course, is what many Christians have tried to do...We cannot deduce anything about Jesus from what we think we know about God; we must now deduce everything about God from what we do know about Jesus. (pg. 137)

For Christians, Jesus not only reveals God to us, but Jesus is the criterion by which we evaluate and judge. We begin with Jesus; then we can entertain new ideas, new movements, other religions, spiritual practices, meditation exercises, etc., if they agree with our understanding of Jesus, and as they agree with the revelation of Jesus. There is much interest in our day in Eastern religions, meditation, psychic phenomena, and metaphysics. There are also many cults, but Christians are not left without an anchor on the sea of religion. Our anchor--our authority--is Jesus. Then, we can pick and choose what best meets our needs. Therefore, how important it is for us to have an understanding of the "real" Jesus and not a distorted or even mistaken Jesus!

The Christ of faith is larger than the earthly Jesus, larger than the belief system and spiritual disciplines of the church. We must never suppose that our understanding of God through Christianity as we have experienced it is the final word. Christ is far larger than our minds can comprehend. Christ is far larger than our western experience. There is truth in all religions. We can learn much from other religions and spiritual disciplines. But, there is also error and evil in all religions, including our own. There is much to be avoided in all religions. An understanding of the "real" Jesus gives us a perspective from which to judge.

I think you will be surprised as we pursue our search how relevant the "real" Jesus is to our day. A fresh picture of Jesus is just what our society needs, just what his church needs today. There are many similarities between the times of Jesus and the times in which we live. Jesus' message, when understood, can have a freshness, vitality and urgency that are needed today. Jesus came with a sense of urgency. The situation that evoked that urgency closely resembles our situation today. Truly, the kingdom of God is near at hand!

We also could stand a fresh look at the "real" Jesus because our country needs some heroes. Our youths need some role models. The World Almanac and Book of Facts polled 2,000 eighth-grade American students to learn which people they most admire and want to be like when they grow up. Can you guess who is the #1 hero of American eighth-graders? Burt Reynolds. Although half of those polled were girls, only five women were on the list and they were actresses, models or pop singers. There was not a single name on the list who is not an entertainer or a sports figure. Not a statesman. Not a scientist. Not an author. Not a painter, musician, sculptor, architect, doctor, cleric, lawyer, or even an astronaut. Columnist Sidney Harris commented, "Societies need people they can look up to and emulate. A nation that does not reward and respect real accomplishments...is weakening its own moral fiber and preparing for its own collapse."

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Jesus didn't make the list either. Perhaps one reason is that the Jesus our young people see is the Jesus portrayed by the church, the Jesus portrayed by adults, and not the "real" Jesus. Perhaps Jesus would regain some popularity if the "real" Jesus could be seen. Our nation needs some heroes. We are in sorry shape when actors and actresses are the role models for our children. I vote for Jesus.

I invite you to participate in this search. I invite you to attend faithfully. I invite you to do primary research yourself. Read the gospel of Luke at one sitting. Sometimes we do ourselves a disservice by reading the Bible a chapter at a time. Allow a period of time, pick up the Bible, and read any of the gospels at one sitting. I suggest Luke because the passages for the gospel lessons in this sermon series will be taken from Luke. Try to read the gospel with an open mind. Picture yourself in the first century and try to read it without the lens of the 20th century. Don't read the Bible as if it is speaking to the 20th century, until you understand what it is saying to the first century.

We're going on a search to find Jesus. Come along. Get your flashlight--the Bible. Be prepared to do some digging with researchers and scholars. Come with an open mind. Pray that God will reveal to you the "real" Jesus.