

## *Disagreeing with Jesus*

A. Stephen Van Kuiken  
Community Congregational U.C.C.  
Pullman, WA  
March 21, 2021

*Jesus taught only one thing: presence.* —Stephen Mitchell

Ancient Witness: Mark 13:5-8, 24-27

A friend, Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, who is a professor of Justice and Peace Studies at St. Thomas in St. Paul, MN, wrote a book called, *Jesus Against Christianity: Reclaiming the Missing Jesus*. In it he says that in the Dominant Model of Christianity, Jesus is missing. And what he means is that the actual life and teachings of Jesus is conspicuously absent and assumes only a minor importance, if any.

The creeds talk about Jesus' birth and death, but nothing in between! It is a Christianity that states Jesus "was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary," and then it skips immediately to "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried." What happened to his life? Isn't that important? Some have called this the *creed with the empty center*.

But I want to ask, What was it about Jesus that attracted those early followers? And didn't they experience a conversion? *Before* Jesus died? Weren't *they* healed? Made whole? Saved? And if experiencing the life and teachings of Jesus was enough for them, can't it also be enough for others?

Jesus was a Jewish rabbi or teacher. He came out of this great teaching tradition, and to me, he was the greatest teacher I've ever known. This wasn't true because he had the greatest techniques or because he never had any pupils that failed. God only knows how many people have heard but who have not learned the lessons of Jesus. No, Jesus was the premier teacher because of the quality and the level of truth in his words.

But Jesus was a Jewish rabbi, and he taught like a Jewish rabbi. A student asked, "Rabbi, why do you always answer my question with a question?" The rabbi responded, "What's wrong with asking questions?" The method of the rabbi was to encourage *dialogue* and *independent thinking*.

There is an old saying: "When two rabbis argue, there will be three opinions." Scriptural texts are revered in Judaism, but students are encouraged to explore *multiple meanings* through dialogue.

When we see Jesus as a rabbi and as someone who was on his own mystical path, what emerges in the Gospels is Jesus as a man who had emptied himself and who had been filled with the vivid reality of the Unnamable Mystery. In Jesus we find a kind of purity

of his heart, and many of us are drawn to it. Jesus and his teaching offer us the same kind of purity of heart.

What do I mean? Well Stephen Mitchell wrote some good words in his book, *The Gospel According to Jesus*:

*If we compare God to sunlight, we can say that the heart is like a window. Cravings, aversions, fixed judgments, concepts, beliefs—all forms of selfishness or self-protection—are, when we cling to them, like dirt on the windowpane. The thicker the dirt, the more opaque the window. When there is no dirt, the window is by its own nature perfectly transparent, and the light can stream through it without hindrance. (p. 14, The Gospel According to Jesus)*

Jesus, as a teacher, lived this way. He was *transparent*. Jesus teaches just by existing; people can feel the light of God shine through him. We might say that Jesus embodies and reflects the radiance of God. We find a deep sense of peace in his presence, and we detect a harmony in his life with the intentions of God. Jesus teaches and demonstrates that all that is needed is to live out a purity of heart. There is no longer a dependence upon external rules or laws. He followed a stream within his own tradition that said that God's wisdom is within and simply awaiting discovery. In the Hebrew Scriptures it says:

*For this teaching which I give you today is not hidden from you, and is not far away. It is not in heaven, for you to say, "Who will go up to heaven and bring it down for us, so that we can hear it and do it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, for you to say, "Who will cross the sea and bring it back for us, so that we can hear and do it?" But the teaching is very near to you: it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it. (Duet. 30:11-15)*

I'm reminded of what Augustine said when someone once asked him what the most important rule for Christians was. He said simply, "to love God and do what you will." Jesus teaches us to allow our hearts to become pure, to empty ourselves and to let go of all other intentions, to be transparent.

This attitude is reflected in the Jesus Prayer that helps us focus our hearts: "hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done..."

*But not everybody agrees about what Jesus thought and taught.* I recently read a book that's been around for awhile (2001) called *The Apocalyptic Jesus* that is a debate between four New Testament scholars.

One side says that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet, that is, he agreed with people like John the Baptist, who believed that God would bring about a cataclysmic and bloody end to the world to establish a new earth and a new Kingdom. In this view, the world will be divided into two:

the righteous and the unrighteous,  
the elect and the non-elect, and

the sheep and the goats,  
and God will preserve the first group and violently destroy the second.

And there are places in the Gospels where it certainly *seems* that Jesus is saying this.  
(Today's ancient witness is one of those places.)

The other side of the debate is represented by a majority of scholars in a relatively new organization called, The Jesus Seminar. This side says that these passages that depict Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet are in the text, but they are part of the layers of writing and re-writing, editorializing and additions, of many people. And the scholars need to do forensic work to uncover the real Jesus and his teaching. Like an archeologist, they try to dig through all of these layers—all of this sediment—to unearth the authentic Jesus.

And they concluded that the portrayals of Jesus as believing in a violent, avenging God who annihilates the enemy is from one of these layers. That is, it represents the view of the *writers* and not Jesus.

Now, I happen to agree with this second group of scholars. I find their research and arguments compelling. And I'll admit that, to be honest, I *want* to believe them. Beyond the level of academic debate, this is a portrait of Jesus that resonates with my heart.

And so here's the thing: What if the other group of scholars is correct? What if Jesus *was* an apocalyptic prophet? Wouldn't it destroy my faith? Or wouldn't I, at least, have to reject Jesus as my spiritual teacher. Well, no.

First, I think that we need to dispel the notion that any spiritual teacher, including Jesus, can or should be perfect and never get some things wrong. Spiritual teachers often help us learn and help us discover in spite of themselves, sometimes. Authentic spiritual teachers, it seems to me, point beyond themselves. Jesus said, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." It's not about me, he was saying. It's not about the teacher; it's about the Reality to which the teacher points. The goal of the teacher is not agreement; the goal is to put the listener in contact with the Divine.

Second, the Ultimate Teacher is already and always within us. The spiritual teacher's main task, it seems to me, is to arrange for this meeting to happen. And so the teacher's job is not so much to impart wisdom but to show where to find it. It is not about having all the correct beliefs and understandings, but rather it's about *how*—how to *experience* the Presence that *gives* wisdom. And so one can disagree with Jesus at different points about the *what*, no problem, because the real point is about the *how*. Stephen Mitchell wrote,

*What is the gospel according to Jesus? Simply this: that the love we all long for in our innermost heart is already present, beyond longing... Jesus taught one thing only: presence. Ultimate reality, the luminous, compassionate intelligence of the universe, is not somewhere else, in some heaven light-years away... It is*

*always right here, right now. That is what the Bible means when it says that God's true name is I am.*

I suspect that Mitchell has a point here. Religion often has had the tendency to push the presence of God either into the past or into the future. But Jesus was one who taught us by his own life about living in the presence of God, in the continual presence of love and acceptance. Jesus had the experience of entering the Kingdom of God and asks his followers to enter into it also.

Jesus, himself, was asked to give one of those elevator summaries of the law and his teachings: "What is the greatest commandment?" His response: "Love God with all your heart, soul and mind." (Matthew 22:36ff) In other words, live in the Presence; love the Presence with your whole being.

[And Jesus taught that we find the grace-bestowing presence of God in the "here and now." But it is hard to live in the here and now. Most of us lose this state of being, says Mitchell,

*as we grow up and become self-conscious, but it doesn't disappear forever; it always is there to be reclaimed, though we have to search hard in order to find it. The rich especially have a hard time reentering this stated of being; they are so possessed by their possessions, so entrenched in their social power, that it is almost impossible for them to let go. But if we need reminding, we can always sit at the feet of our young children. They, because they haven't yet developed a firm sense of past and future, accept the infinite abundance of the present with all their hearts, in complete trust.]*

Jesus' trust in God was as natural as breathing. He reflected God's deep love for *everything*—

for the sick and despised, the morally admirable and the morally repugnant,  
for weeds as well as flowers, lions as well as lambs.

God's compassion embraces all people. There are no pre-conditions for it. When we are ready to receive it, it is there. And the more we live in its presence, the more effortlessly it flows through us. Jesus lived it and taught it.

Paul Tillich once wrote,

*For many people the Golden Rule is considered as the real content of Christianity... But we know that this is not the answer of the New Testament. The great commandment as Jesus repeats it... infinitely transcends the Golden Rule.*

Jesus goes way beyond "do to others what you would like to be done to you." He said, "You have heard it said, 'love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies... For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?" (Matthew 5:43ff) Jesus demonstrated a way of loving *without expecting anything in*

*return.* For Jesus, the Golden Rule was too shallow, and instead he talked about a place where love flows unconditionally.

Living in this place—in the Presence—led Jesus to deeds of compassion, to stand up for justice, to speak truth to power, to challenge systems of violence, to identify with the oppressed, to speak the prophetic word. For this he was labeled a heretic, a rebel and a revolutionary. And in his actions, his life and his teachings, Jesus never demands unquestioning agreement but simply points toward Life.

*(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)*