

HAS THE CHURCH RESCUED JESUS FROM HIS EXTREMISM?

Just what do we mean by such an audacious and reckless title as Jesus being “rescued from his extremism?” A close examination of the four gospels will show us that translators, commentators, Bible instructors and teachers have made it a point to present a different Jesus than how he is presented in the gospel records, and thus rescue him from the extreme Jesus revealed in the text of the New Testament. The description of Jesus that has been held up to us is “gentle Jesus, meek and mild,” a pale, effeminate, pathetic figure. As a result, Christianity has become sentimentalized and romanticized to the extent that the impression is given that Jesus had nothing to do with the God who incinerated Sodom and Gomorrah, or who established murderous, adulterous David as an ancestor of Christ. As Mark Galli stated it in his book *Jesus Mean and Wild*: “The main problem is that we’ve become deaf to the richer parts of the symphony of love. We hear the melody played by the strings but ignore the brass and wind and especially the percussion sections. We don’t notice the strong harmonies, the counterpoint, the dissonant chords. We are left with a memorable tune that lifts our spirits, but we are missing out on the richness of the music God would have us hear.” Jesus said, “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me” (John 12:32). He has not drawn all men, not even a majority of men, and maybe he has never been lifted up as the Scriptures show him to have been. An unreal, imaginary and weak Jesus who is rather placid, unpretentious and timid is being lifted up instead, and men are not being drawn by it. Jesus did say “I am gentle and humble in heart” (Matt. 11:29), but this was spoken to common people who were in need. His confrontation with religious leaders and unbelievers was quite different when he said this. He had just pronounced woes upon Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum., nothing gentle and humble there.

Let’s begin with the birth of Jesus. Much modern church pageantry has strayed from the Biblical record and given some mistaken ideas concerning the birth of Jesus. We have the idea that Jesus was born the very night Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem. Luke simply says: “And it came about while they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth” (Lk. 2:6) And certainly the “wise” men or “magi” did not make the scene the night Jesus was born. “And they came into the house and saw the Child with Mary His mother ...” (Mt. 2:11). The word usually translated “wise men” is *magoi*, the same root word used to describe Simon, the sorcerer in (Acts 8:9-11), and Elymas the sorcerer who withstood Paul in Paphos Acts 13:5-8). Regardless who these Magi were, God went outside the bounds of Judaism and brought Gentile pagans to acknowledge and worship the Messiah, something the Jewish Scriptures had predicted would happen as a result of this birth: “And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising (Isa. 60:3); “Let the kings of Tarshish and the islands bring presents, the kings of Sheba and Seba offer gifts. And let all kings, bow down before him. All nations serve him” (Psalm 72:10). It took much debate for the Jews to accept that “God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name” (Acts 15: 7, 14).

There is no record that says Jesus was born in December. The stables at that time were probably a sheep pen under the house. The infant Jesus was laid in a hay trough. Translators probably knew people expect “biblical English” in the gospels, so they translated hay trough (*phatne*) as “manger.” They were in the stable because “there was no room for them in the inn” (Lk. 2:7). In Christmas pageants there is always featured an “innkeeper” and the inn is portrayed as a Bible-times motel. The word “inn” (*katalumati*) is translated “guest room” in Mark 14:14 and Luke 22:11 referring to the upper room where the last supper was held. The only other place in the New Testament where an inn is mentioned is in the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:35 and the word is *pandoxeion*. This passage is also the only time an “innkeeper” is mentioned.

Fast forward to the only time the boyhood of Jesus is mentioned, that is, when he along with his parents visited Jerusalem to observe the Passover and he slips away from them in order to “sit with the scholars in the Temple, hearing them and asking them questions” (Luke 2:46). When they found him his mother asked, “Why have you treated us this way?” His answer was “Why is it that you were looking for me? Did you not know that I had to be in my Father’s house?” Coming from a young pre-teen this is a rather harsh and severe rebuke. But the story continues: “And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and he continued in subjection to them, and his mother treasured the things in his heart” (ver. 51). However, this stance of a rebel comes out again and again, as we shall see, when family ties are concerned. One such instant is John 2:4 at a wedding in Cana of Galilee when his mother informed him “They have no wine.” His curt answer was “What to me and to you, woman; my hour has not yet come.” The translators evidently felt the literal translation of this Jewish idiom was confusing, and they must save Jesus from this, so they translated it “Woman, what does that have to do with us?”

Early in his ministry “his mother and his brothers arrived and standing outside they sent word to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, ‘Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.’ Answering them he said, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” Looking about at those who were sitting around him, he said, ‘Behold my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother’” (Mark 3:31-35). Members of his family must have been at a loss to understand this disturbing member of the family. John 7:5 states: “Not even his brothers were believing him.” No wonder his own family “went out to take custody of him, for they were saying ‘He has lost his senses,’” and the scribes in Jerusalem were saying, “He is possessed by Beelzebul and he casts out demons by the ruler of demons” (Mark 3:21, 22). What did his family think when he said: “If one coming to me and does not hate his father and his mother, and his wife and children, and his brothers and sisters, and for that matter, his own life, he cannot be my disciple?” (Luke 14:26). And even more harshly, he says in Matthew 10:35-37: “I have come to set a man against his father, and daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and

one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." This is one of the most extreme statements Jesus makes. We tend to explain such passages as in the light of our American individualism, and translators and commentaries do not help us very much. For example, noted Bible scholar in the eighteenth century, Albert Barnes, in his *Notes on the New Testament* wrote on this passage: "Christ did not mean to say here that the object of his coming was to produce discord and contention, for he was the Prince of Peace. The wickedness of men, and not the religion of the gospel is the cause of hostility." This is the problem with most commentators...trying to explain to their readers what Christ meant to say. This illustrates the truth of our theme in this article, trying to rescue Jesus from his extremism. Here he sets forth the most demanding and uncompromising conditions for being his disciples. No wonder his family tried to take him into custody because they thought he had lost his senses (Mark 3:21). Jesus does not condemn family love, but puts it in its proper place, which is not first of all.

Jesus destroys a herd of swine, without regard or compensation to the owners (Matt. 8:28-34, Mark 5:1-20). Jesus came into the country of the Gerasenes, and encountered a demon possessed man, possessed of a legion of demons. There was a large herd of swine nearby and the demons "*implored* him saying, 'send us into the swine'...and Jesus *gave them permission*." Two thousand swine rushed down and drowned in the sea. When the people of the area came out, they had nothing to say about the healed man, rather they begged Jesus to leave the area. The ultra-fastidious animal lovers would probably blame Jesus and complain about cruelty to animals. William Barclay in his *Gospel of Mark* presents us with another example of rescuing Jesus from his extremism by declaring "the loud terrifying cries of the man frightened the swine into their destruction."

Another episode of Jesus destroying a money making business is recorded in all four gospels how that in a moment of rage he "began to drive out those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves; and he would not permit anyone to carry merchandise through the temple. And he began to teach them saying, 'Is it not written, My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations? But you have made it a robber's den.'" Jesus was quoting from a complaint God had hundreds of years earlier (Jer. 7:11). They were not paying attention to the word. The chief priests and the scribes heard this, and began seeking how to destroy him, for they were afraid of him" (Mark:15-18). All four gospels record this event of Jesus cleansing he temple. If the writers wanted to portray only a compassionate Jesus, they could have conveniently omitted this account. This was not the "meek and mild gentle Jesus." This is comparable to a preacher today going into some church in a rich American suburb, a place taking pride in their massive building and sophisticated congregation, and whip the deacons holding the collection plates, and cry out "make not my Father's house a market place."

One of the most stupefying and revolutionary of the teachings of Jesus is found in the sermon on the Mount when he says in Matthew 5:38-41: "You have heard that it was said 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say unto you do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other cheek also. If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him take your coat also. Whoever forces you to go one

mile, go with him two." This is a repudiation of the accepted practice of retaliation. For many Christians to rescue Jesus from this evident extremism they simply ignore it and pretend that he never said it. This is true of many other statements found in the sermon on the mount.

What Jesus thought of the religious leaders is spelled out in John 8:44 when he stated: "You are of your father the devil and you want to do the desires of your father." He had earlier called Peter "Satan" (Matt. 16:23). Who would dare today to castigate religious leaders with such language? But that is only one example; consider his words to the religious hierarchy recorded in Matthew 23:1-33). After telling the multitudes of some evil characteristics of the scribes and Pharisee (some which describe much of the modern clergy), he then pronounces a series of seven woes against them (verses 13-33). Seven times he calls them hypocrites, then adding insult to injury he says they are blind guides (four times) and tells them they are fools, serpents and a brood of vipers who shall not escape the sentence of hell. He calls them whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful but are full of dead men's bones. This doesn't coincide with our "nice guy" image of Jesus. What "man of the cloth" would dare to preach such a sermon today? There is no way the church can rescue Jesus from his extremism expressed in this twenty third chapter of Matthew.

Jesus was and certainly knew himself to be the son of God, but he also was the son of man and shared fully in human emotions. One of these emotions, hidden in our concept of the "gentle, meek and mild Jesus" is his anger. It was prophesied that unless kings and leaders show discernment and "do homage to the Son" he would "become angry and they would perish, for his wrath is soon kindled" (Psalm 2:10, 12). In the synagogue "the scribes and Pharisees were watching him closely, to see if he healed on the Sabbath, in order that they might find reason to accuse him" (Luke 6:7), "And after looking around at them with *anger*, grieved at their hardness of heart" he healed the man with a withered hand (Mark 3:5). Jesus seems to deliberately provoke the religious leaders. He could have simply waited until the Sabbath was over. He did this not because he was a trouble maker, but because "he knew what they were thinking" (Luke. 6:8), and it was time to confront them publicly. There are several words and actions that describe the anger of Jesus; the anger of Jesus is expressed not as much in words as deeds. When the disciples rebuked those bringing children to him, "He was *indignant*" (Greek: angry) (Mark 10:14). This was typical of his ministry; to reach out to those overlooked and rejected by society. He preferred the company of the lowly and despised, he dealt with prostitutes and adulterers, he touched the lepers (forbidden by Levitical law), he dined with publicans and sinners and ate with tax collectors, even calling one to be an apostle. Sometimes the actions of people show us reason for Jesus being angry. This is illustrated in Mark 1:39-45. Jesus freely "went into all the synagogues in Galilee preaching and casting out demons" (ver. 39). He healed a leper because he had compassion on him. He then *sternly* (Greek: scolded) warned him and immediately *sent him away* (Greek: cast out) saying "See that you say nothing to anyone, but go show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, but he went out and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the news about, to such an extent that Jesus could no longer publicly enter a city, but stayed out in unpopulated areas" (ver. 44, 45). The leper wanted to do something extraordinary for Jesus, but Jesus does not want the extraordinary, he wants obedience. This witness, like much witness today, was for the wrong reasons.1