

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Excursus: Justification Revisited (Part V)

Newsweek magazine recently ran a provocative article announcing that despite our nation's Christian roots, America has become essentially Hindu – at least as far as the polling data goes. It shows that conceptually, at least, we are slowly becoming more like Hindus and less like traditional Christians in the ways we think about God, ourselves, each other, and eternity. The Rig Veda, the most ancient Hindu scripture, says this: “Truth is One, but the sages speak of it by many names.” A Hindu believes there are many paths to God. Jesus is one way, the Qur’an is another, yoga practice is a third. None is better than any other; all are equal. The most traditional, conservative Christians have not been taught to think like this. They learn in Sunday school that their religion is true, and others are false. Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me.” Americans are no longer buying it. According to a 2008 Pew Forum survey, 65 percent of us believe that “many religions can lead to eternal life”—including 37 percent of white evangelicals, the group most likely to believe that salvation is theirs alone. Also, the number of people who seek spiritual truth outside church is growing. Thirty percent of Americans call themselves “spiritual, not religious,” according to a 2009 NEWSWEEK Poll, up from 24 percent in 2005. Stephen Prothero, religion professor at Boston University, has long framed the American propensity for “the divine-deli-cafeteria religion” as “very much in the spirit of Hinduism. You’re not picking and choosing from different religions, because they’re all the same,” he says. “It isn’t about orthodoxy. It’s about whatever works. If going to yoga works, great—and if going to Catholic mass works, great. And if going to Catholic mass plus the yoga plus the Buddhist retreat works, that’s great, too.” Then there’s the question of what happens when you die. Christians traditionally believe that bodies and souls are sacred, that together they comprise the “self,” and that at the end of time they will be reunited in the Resurrection. You need both, in other words, and you need them forever. Hindus believe no such thing. At death, the body burns on a pyre, while the spirit—where identity resides—escapes. In reincarnation, central to Hinduism, selves come back to earth again and again in different bodies. So here is another way in which Americans are becoming more Hindu: 24 percent of Americans say they believe in reincarnation, according to a 2008 Harris poll. So agnostic are we about the ultimate fates of our bodies that we’re burning them—like Hindus—after death. More than a third of Americans now choose cremation, according to the Cremation Association of North America, up from 6 percent in 1975. “I do think the more spiritual role of religion tends to deemphasize some of the more starkly literal interpretations of the Resurrection,” agrees Diana Eck, professor of comparative religion at Harvard. So let us all say “om.”¹

Regrettably, this same mentality affects a growing number of professing evangelicals. Brian McLaren, a leading voice in what goes by the name “The Emergent Church,” declared that he has no interest in turning Muslim, Hindus or Jews into Christians – rather he would like to see them remaining as they are and simply follow Jesus in their own way.² Another example of this mindset is seen in Carl Medearis, a prominent missionary amongst Muslims who says that living like Jesus is the key to getting Muslims to embrace the Gospel by following Jesus while still remaining a Muslim.³

C. Fitzsimons Allison accurately noted that, “We are susceptible to heretical teachings because, in one form or another, they nurture and reflect the way we would have it be rather than the way God has provided...heresies pander to the most unworthy tendencies of the human heart. It is astonishing how little attention has been given to these two aspects of heresy: its cruelty and its pandering to sin.”⁴ The popular notion that the gospel revolves around following the example of Jesus is one deadly form of mixing law and gospel with the result being something that has “an appearance of wisdom” and leads only to tragic consequences (Col. 2:23).

I. FOLLOWING JESUS: WHICH ONE?

WWJD has become another Evangelical slogan. “What would Jesus do?” Before delving into this most recent example of how so much of popular evangelicalism tends to always be striking the wrong note, we can begin to address the question by making some very obvious inquiries. Which Jesus are we talking about here? The Jesus of the Mormons? (Did you know that Mormons also wear the WWJD bracelets?) Or maybe the Jesus of the Jehovah Witnesses or the one that recently emerged dressed in Gnostic garb from the findings of the notorious *Jesus Seminar*?⁵

Take the example of Carl Medearis (that I earlier cited). He confidently declared, “The most important thing we can do as followers of Jesus is to do just that. Follow him. Jesus himself is the Good News. The message that we carry is Jesus. Not church, not capitalism, not democracy, not doctrine, not the religion of Christianity, not Calvin, not Luther, not Democrat, not Republican. If we truly wish to be able to build a relationship with a Muslim friend, the most important thing we can do is to follow Jesus’ lead. Jesus had compassion for people, and he valued the same quality in his disciples, even above personal sacrifice.”⁶ Yet Medearis nowhere spells out what this entails. In fact, it becomes obvious that he *selectively* picks and chooses certain traits of Jesus and ignores the rest. It is critically important that we determine which particular Jesus we are talking about. After all, the apostle Paul does warn us that there is more than one Jesus (2 Cor. 11:4). We simply cannot assume the actions of any person before we know who that person actually is. Having put that crucial issue on the table, the next thing we need to do is determine the basis for asking the question in the first place. Why do we want to know about what the Jesus of the New Testament record would do in any given situation that confronts us today? This question presumes that we actually know (in some detail) what Jesus really did do. This means that we are going to need to have a fairly comprehensive working knowledge of the life of Jesus as set forth in the four gospels. I venture to suggest, however, that the great majority of the WWJD devotees have, at best, a very sketchy grasp of chronological events in the life of Christ. Most Christians, sadly, know only a few isolated events in the life of Jesus and even here they rarely grasp the biblical import of those narratives.

II. WILL THE REAL JESUS PLEASE STAND UP?

Medearis says that the best way to lead people to Christ consists of being “willing to be like Jesus, talk like Jesus and love like Jesus”⁷ Be like Jesus? Let’s look at the gospel record. These documents tell us, among other things, that Jesus fasted for long periods of time (Matt. 4:2); that He often rose early for extended time of prayer (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16); that He never sinned (John 8:46; Heb. 4:15); and He perfectly and completely kept the Law (Matt. 5:17; John 17:4; Heb. 10:7). By the way, on that last point, it should be noted that even though Jesus had some very harsh things to say about how the Pharisees corrupted the fourth commandment, He *did* keep the Sabbath. I add this bit of information because I doubt that many folk who go around wearing WWJD bracelets really want to imitate Jesus when it comes to the Sabbath question. Finally, what are we to make of the texts that tell us that Jesus looked round at them with anger (Mark 3:5), or that Jesus was indignant at the disciples (Mark 10:14)? And how about Jesus cleansing the Temple (Matt. 21:12-13)?

III. JESUS AS ROLE MODEL?

I am going to make a statement that will, no doubt, surprise (and maybe make angry) some Christians. Jesus does not appear in the pages of the New Testament primarily as a role model. I will repeat that

remark for the sake of emphasis. The New Testament does not present Jesus primarily as a role model, especially in the sense in which we today use the expression, “role model” (a synonym, practically speaking, for hero, usually with celebrity status). It is worthwhile to note that the present day preoccupation with WWJD owes its popularity to a book written about a century ago. That book, *In His Steps*, was written by Charles Sheldon (1857-1946), a Congregational minister and ardent “social gospel” advocate. To date the book (which is still in print) has sold over 35,000,000 copies. The phrase “social gospel” does not set off alarms and raise red flags today as it did with our evangelical forebears. But there was a time, in our not too distant past, when evangelicals would hear phrases like “Jesus is our role model” and immediately sense that a theological liberal was on the premises. And, as it turns out, Sheldon was not an evangelical. In fact, he looked at Jesus, not through the eyes of orthodoxy, but as a theological liberal who viewed Jesus first and foremost as a religious reformer and role model. In this sense, Jesus is a role model in the same way that any other great religious leader is, be it Buddha or Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., or even Mother Theresa. Sheldon’s Jesus (as well as Medearis) turns out to be simply a universal moral template, especially as it pertains to social issues. The New Testament never presents Jesus in that light. We are urged, for example, to emulate the apostle Paul (I Cor. 4:16; 11:1), but not in the sense that we are to try and hypothetically determine how Paul (or Jesus) would act in any given situation—but rather we are to follow him in his obedience to the Word of God. Besides, and this needs to be said up front, we don’t know how Jesus would respond in many of the situations that confront us today, and it is more than a little quixotic for anyone to suggest that he possesses the innate ability to determine how Jesus would respond. Why is the whole approach of WWJD so terribly flawed? In addition to being pretentious, it reflects the quick-fix formula mentality that many evangelicals eagerly embrace. But I can hear someone say, “Wait a minute. Are you saying that we should not imitate Jesus?” No, not at all, but there is a massive difference between the call to Christlikeness and the decidedly unbiblical notion lurking behind WWJD. Christlikeness has to do with the development of character. It is the manifestation of the fruit of the spirit. WWJD, on the other hand, is an artificial formula that is similar to tying a string around your finger so you will remember to pick up some item at the store. Anyone can follow this formula and you do not need Jesus in order to do so. There is nothing distinctively Christian about it, and in reality, it can be nothing but a religious cloak for the flesh.

CONCLUSION: Two final observations. *One*, the Biblical call to follow Jesus has to do with discipleship. It is an aspect of sanctification. We are called to have the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:1-8). But this text is not urging us to ask the question, “What would Jesus do?”—rather, Paul directs us to what Jesus actually *did* do. The exhortation, “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus,” is very similar to the call for mind renewal in Romans 12:1-2. This mindset is to characterize our day-to-day walk, not simply on occasions when we have tough decisions to make. We are to be humble-minded and unselfish, and this is what it means to imitate Christ. B. B. Warfield, in one of his chapel sermons delivered to students at Princeton Theological Seminary, said: “He whom as our Master we have engaged to obey, whom as our Example we are pledged to imitate, is presented to us here as the great model of self-sacrificing unselfishness. ‘Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus,’ is the apostle’s pleading. We need to note carefully, however, that it is not self-depreciation, but self-abnegation, that is thus commended to us. If we would follow Christ, we must, every one of us, not in pride but in humility, yet not in lowness but in lowliness, not degrade ourselves but forget ourselves, and seek every man not his own things but those of others.”⁸ Warfield’s point (and more importantly the point that Paul is underscoring) is distantly removed from the concept of WWJD. If we look carefully, WWJD really is a form of behavior modification. I recently watched a TV preacher wax eloquent on the benefits of WWJD. In the course of his sermon he asked the question, “What is sin?” The Bible tells us plainly that sin is the transgression of the Law (I John 3:4). That wasn’t the answer the TV preacher gave. Rather, he declared that sin “is anything that Jesus would not do.” What’s wrong with that? For starters, it views sin almost exclusively in terms of specific negative acts—what Jesus would *not* do. Sin, however, is more than acts of commission. Sin also involves the omission of duty. Failure to love God with all our being and likewise our neighbor as ourselves is transgression as well. This brings me to the crux of the matter. “What would

Jesus do?" Jesus would fulfill all righteousness. Jesus would fully obey God. Jesus would, as the last Adam, not fail as the first Adam did. His life of obedience is absolutely essential to His work of redemption. Christians often fail to realize that Jesus' active obedience, demonstrated in His sinless life, is also an important aspect of our salvation (cf. Rom. 5:19; Heb. 5:8-9; 10:9-10). Listen carefully to the words of John Murray, in a sermon on Philippians 2:5-9: "It is on the supreme example of our Lord that the basic virtues of the Christian life are nurtured. It is significant that what was unique in Jesus' undertaking is the pattern. There can be no repetition or duplication of what He has done. To have the mind that was in Christ Jesus is not mimicry of His action. It is to be animated in our vocation and in our relations to others by that mind exemplified by Him in His inimitable commitment. Our Lord's incomparable self-humiliation accords to the humble-mindedness required of us the highest sanction. 'It is enough for the disciple to be as his master, and the servant as his lord.'"⁹ *Second*, when people like McLaren and Medearis urge people to follow Jesus and thus imply that this constitutes the gospel is a serious error. In this scheme the focus is on Jesus as our example and not primarily on Jesus our Redeemer. In essence this cuts the heart out of the gospel because the person and work of Christ gets greatly diminished. In fact the cross disappears. The call to follow Jesus as the basis for our justification amounts in the final analysis to justification by works, and as such falls under the Apostle Paul's anathema (Gal. 1:6-9).

ENDNOTES

¹ <http://www.newsweek.com/id/212155/output/print>.

² B. McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize* (Zondervan 2002) pp. 47-50.

³ Carl Medearis, *Muslims, Christians, and Jesus: Gaining Understanding and Building Relationships* (Bethany House 2008) p. 133, 134.

⁴ C. F. Allison, *The Cruelty of Heresy: An Affirmation of Christian Orthodoxy* (Morehouse, 1993) p. 17.

⁵ Marcus Borg, one of the members of the *Jesus Seminar*, rejects many essential Christian doctrines such as the Virgin Birth, and Bodily resurrection of Christ. Calling such doctrines outdated relics, instead he insists we focus on following the example of Christ. "The earlier paradigm has nourished and continues to nourish lives of deep devotion, faith, and love. The Spirit of God can and does work through it. It has for centuries and still does. When it leads to a strong sense of the reality and grace of God, to following Jesus, and to lives filled with compassion and a passion for justice, as it sometimes does, all one can say is, 'Praise the Lord.' But for millions of others, the earlier paradigm no longer works. Unpersuasive to them, it has become a stumbling block. What is the Christian message, the Christian gospel, for people who can't be literalists or exclusivists? What do we have to say to them? In an important sense, this is an issue of evangelism. For these millions, the emerging paradigm provides a way of taking Christianity and the Christian life seriously." *The Heart of Christianity* (Harper Collins, 2003) p. 27.

⁶ Medearis, op. cit. p. 33. He goes on to write, "To open dialogue, what I find most effective and most Christlike is to stay focused on Jesus. I talk about his leadership style, his wisdom, his teachings, and his miracles" (p. 49). This stands in sharp contrast with the approach of the Apostle Paul who declared that his message was focused on Christ crucified (I Cor. 2:2).

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 155.

⁸ B. B. Warfield, *The Saviour of the World* (rpt. Banner of Truth 1992) p. 174.

⁹ *Collected Writings of John Murray III* (The Banner of Truth 1982) p. 241.