



Lesson 8: Jesus and the Things to Come

Dear friends,

Not long ago, I heard the eminent New Testament scholar Luke Johnson speak on the subject of the "historical Jesus" at the National Cathedral. It was a scintillating presentation. (If you ever get the chance to hear Johnson, please take it.) What has stayed with me from that night was Johnson's observation that, despite claims to the contrary, the Jesus offered by many recent scholars is actually much less radical than the Jesus of the Gospels. This thought is echoed in Charlotte Allen's wonderful book *The Human Christ*, which details the extent to which historians have always managed to find a Jesus who looks remarkably like themselves. As George Tyrell put it, historians looked down the well of history and saw their own reflection. Similarly, Jewish scholar Jacob Neusner has critiqued recent Jewish attempts to uncover an acceptable Jesus, saying that "Theologians produced the figure they could admire most at the least cost."

A notable exception to this longstanding trend is Albert Schweitzer, whose challenge to New Testament scholarship is as relevant today as it was a century ago. Schweitzer himself penned one of the most famous passages about Jesus in modern literature, the concluding paragraph of his *Quest of the Historical Jesus*:

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: 'Follow thou me!' and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.

As Johnson observed, it is the mysterious and difficult Jesus of the Gospels who is the true radical, the one who has inspired so much devotion and changed so many lives over so many centuries. This Jesus makes extraordinary claims and exceptional demands. He is no 21st century talking-head academic.

Of course, scholars aren't the only ones who attempt to tame Jesus. The church has done a superlative job of it for centuries. The Jesus preached in fundamentalist churches is a cultural conservative, the Jesus preached in progressive churches is a political liberal, and so on. The imprimatur of Jesus still has cash value in this society, so it is little wonder that every side claims Him.

My own study of Jesus has brought me to a point rather like that of Schweitzer. The otherness of Jesus confronts me at every turn. He will not fit comfortably into my world. Indeed, He challenges it profoundly. The temptation to domesticate Him is always present but so too is His call to a life that is deeper and fuller—and radically at variance with my own worldly self-interest. Books and sermons might give me a Jesus whom I could live with, but very few offer me a Jesus for whom I could live. Thankfully, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John have already done that.

Grace & peace,
Craig

For further reflection: If you're interested in pursuing this subject further, let me commend to you a masterful study by Edinburgh professor Larry Hurtado titled *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*. It is one of the sanest and most insightful books ever written in the field of New Testament history.