

Jesus: “Who Do UU Say That I Am?”

A Sermon by The Rev. Dick Weston-Jones, December 17, 2006

For The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, North Carolina

Every year at this time our culture goes bonkers in a cultural celebration disguised as a religious holiday. Devout atheists join with born-again Christians to sing carols whose theology would have the non-Christians slathering at the mouth at any other time. In the summertime they'd enjoy hearing the Lounge Lizards sing "Jesus Loves Me, But He Can't Stand You." Now the carol is "Jesus Our Brother, Kind and Good." Who is this fellow we serenade in December? Why do religious skeptics fold so readily now? What do UUs really think of him?

You may remember reading a UU World article a few years ago about the Jesus Seminar. They're a group of Bible scholars who've met regularly for two decades to vote about what Jesus really might have said and done. A majority of them decided that only 18% of the words attributed to him in the New Testament were authentic or likely to have been said by him at all.

About 150 scholars, mostly from U.S. seminaries and universities, attend their meetings. Most are Christians—Baptists, Methodists, Brethren, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Catholics—and Jews. The World said only one Unitarian took part, the minister of a Texas UU Church. They were wrong. Thomas Jefferson also voted on every one of their ballots.

Nearly 200 years ago Jefferson edited the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John for his own use. The Jefferson Bible contains only what Tom thought Jesus really might have said and done. In the Jesus Seminar meetings one scholar was assigned the task of voting for Jefferson on the basis of what he had kept in his personal version for his own use. Though he was far ahead of his time Jefferson agreed with the Seminar on almost every vote, according to Bob Funk, Jesus Seminar founder. He told me that several years ago at a study retreat I organized with him for California UU ministers.

When I quote Jesus now I use the Seminar's translation from the New Testament that is titled The Five Gospels, published in 1993. The part they call the fifth gospel is The Book of Thomas that was discovered a half century ago, buried in a jug in an Egyptian desert. In 1998 the Jesus Seminar published another book, The Acts of Jesus to tell what they think he really did. They say he didn't do much that the Bible says he did.

As you might guess this group of scholars is controversial even though they've said little that hasn't been taught for over 80 years in many mainline theological schools. I heard many claims like theirs in my New Testament classes at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley in 1964. My father said he heard them as a student at Harvard Divinity School in the 1920's.

What's new is that these scholars made their decisions in public by voting, explaining why they think as they do. Fundamentalists hate them because they aren't biblical literalists. If they were they wouldn't have to decide what JC did or did not say and do. Some teachers criticize their work but the truth is that virtually all non-fundamentalist Bible scholars agree with their assumptions and findings. Jesus Seminar scholars obviously disagree among themselves about some issues since their votes tell what percentage of them agree on the authenticity of each saying or act of Jesus.

Many people in this church would agree with them according to a survey I conducted here last month. We used the same wording that was in a continental study of UUs 40 years ago. Your percentages of conflicting responses were remarkably similar to those in the continental UU survey.

There were only 8 questions in our survey. People were asked to say whether they "strongly agreed," "agreed," "disagreed," "strongly disagreed," or "didn't know" about statements. We got replies from about two thirds of our members and friends, 43 people. You agreed with each other on 6 of the issues—the same ones other UUs agreed upon, and disagreed on 2 of them.

Like the UUs in the continental study, you weren't sure whether or not Jesus thought himself a Messiah or Christ, or if he broke with Judaism in creating a "new religion." Fewer than half of you said he did or he didn't, and 40% of you said you don't know if Jesus thought himself to be Christ. It may surprise you to learn that the Jesus Seminar scholars agreed with those who said he didn't. Almost all of them are Christian but they say Jesus never called himself the "Christ." They say those words were put in his mouth by the later writers who actually wrote the New Testament.

Twenty-two percent of you doubt whether Jesus ever lived, but two-thirds of you think there's no reason to doubt that. Even if (like the scholars) you don't agree that he did all the things the Bible says he did, there must have been someone who preached the "Sermon on the Mount" or taught people the things the Bible says he did. You might as well call him Jesus.

Who was this guy? A bare majority of you agrees he "was essentially in the tradition of the Jewish prophets," but 61% of you said "trustworthy historical records are so scanty that we can really know little about him." The scholars and I think that too. The first written mention of him by anyone other than a Christian didn't appear until 50 years after his death.

Then Josephus, a Roman, mentioned him in passing in his History of the Jewish Wars. Scholars agree that the oldest Biblical mention was in a letter written by Paul 20 years or so after Jesus died—and that Paul had never seen Jesus except in a hallucination on the road to Damascus.

The oldest gospel, Mark, came 40 years after his death, and scholars say Mark never saw him either. In spite of exaggerated reports in the Bible Jesus' followers probably numbered in the dozens during his lifetime. None of them wrote anything about him because they were illiterate. Without printing presses there was no reason for most people to learn to read or write. Most scholars agree that no stories were written down by anyone who ever saw Jesus.

Fourteen of you or 34% believe that "Jesus, breaking with Judaism created a new religion," but 19 or 47% don't believe that. The scholars are with those who don't think that. The gospels don't report any interest on Jesus' part in starting a new religion. Just where did that religion of Christianity come from, then? It was his followers led by Peter and Paul who started it. Scholars agree Jesus was a Jew, following Jewish traditions even while disagreeing strongly with many contemporary practices. He didn't keep kosher eating laws and he violated many other common Jewish standards as well. Most scholars agree with the 83% of you who said "after Jesus' death the church created the idea of his divinity."

Nine of you agreed that "Jesus' belief in the end of the world so affected his teachings that their value for modern [people] is limited." But 25 of you (62%) disagreed with that. Again most of you saw this the way the scholars do. This is one of their most controversial positions.

Until recently most Bible scholars said Jesus thought the end of the world was coming. When he wrote The Quest For The Historical Jesus Albert Schweitzer said he thought Jesus believed that. Most scholars before the 1970's agreed but the pendulum has swung back and now most Seminar scholars say Jesus never said anything that showed he expected an imminent end to the world. They think that view belonged to the man who wrote the book of Mark, who put his own words into Jesus' mouth: "And he used to tell them [said Mark 9:1] 'I swear to you: Some of those standing here won't ever taste death before they see God's imperial rule set in with power.'"

On the other hand when 62% of you disagreed that "Jesus' belief in the end of the world so affected his teachings that their value for modern people is limited," you may have objected less to claims that Jesus expected the end than you were saying you believe "Jesus' teachings are as true and useful now as then." In fact, 76% of you did agree with that latter statement and the scholars agree with you too.

It's curious that Jesus Seminar scholars disagree so much with the Christian churches that ultimately pay their salaries. What do they think were the real teachings of this man we celebrate in Christmas?

Roy Hoover, co-author of The Five Gospels says "at the heart of Jesus' teaching is a vision of the good life, a life ruled by the good that he referred to as 'the reign of God.' That phrase encapsulates Jesus' vision of Israel's religious ideal: life in a community that puts its whole trust in God's goodness and power and whose members devote themselves wholeheartedly to doing God's will, by imitating [His] unconditional and indiscriminate generosity." If you have doubts about God, I say take it easy, enjoy this world and love one another. That's what Jesus said too.

In Luke 17: 20-21 Jesus said "You won't be able to observe the coming of God's imperial rule. People are not going to be able to say 'Look, here it is!' or 'Over there!' On the contrary, God's imperial rule is right there in your presence." That line was mistranslated in the King James Version as "the kingdom of God is within you" as if Jesus were saying "it's inside you." The Hebrew clearly means that Jesus said it's all around us, right here and now, everywhere and everywhen.

This claim, supported by a 57% vote of the scholars, lies at the heart of everything Jesus said and did. The people who wrote the gospels long after he died were apocalyptic. They expected this whole wonderful show that we call life to end soon with the coming of the "rapture." Jesus' claim that the realm of God was *already* here didn't help them. Luke didn't like Jesus' words but he had to leave them in his account because they were too well known to cut them out of his gospel. So they stayed in the Bible.

Jesus urged those listening to him not to "fret about life—what you're going to eat—or about your body—what you're going to wear." Luke (12:22-25) reminds us that he said "Remember, there is more to living than food and clothing. Think about the crows: they don't plant or harvest, they don't have storerooms or barns. Yet God feeds them. You're worth a lot more than the birds! Can any of you add an hour to life by fretting about it?" That doesn't sound like he wanted to scare people about the end of the world, does it?

He urged people not to waste time planning so for the future because our needs will be taken care of if we relax and treat one other with caring love. The future society he envisioned wouldn't be divided by wealth or race or such. All we have to do is love one another. Social change and the good life will come on its own to everyone.

Some 76% of you agreed that "Jesus' teachings are as true and useful now as then" though 12% of you disagreed. Most of you probably like some things he is supposed to have said better than other things. I bet you have different ideas about which teachings are most useful and true and which may get you in trouble. There are things in his advice that I haven't brought myself to accept, like turning the other cheek when someone hits you; loaning money to anyone who wants it without thinking about how you'll get it back, or letting a thief have your shirt if he steals your coat. I'm a pragmatist. I like Jesus' ideas even though some of them do put me off. I bet it goes better if you're confident there's a God in Heaven to back it all up.

Yay! It's Christmas. Let's act as if we believe—if only for a time, and take joy in all the people we know who find this a deeply spiritual season! You can celebrate it no matter what you believe. Maybe that will help us all to let go and love one another, no matter what we believe about Jesus. Don't give him up to the Fundamentalists. He belongs to our heritage as much as he belongs to theirs. I think he would have been a good Unitarian Universalist!

Dick Weston-Jones

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC

1710 Old NC 10, Hillsborough, NC 27278 (919, 644-0567)

The Rev. Dick Weston-Jones, Consulting Minister; phone 919, 932-7447, dwj@wuorld.org