

A Call to Faithfulness: Why Holy Trinity Joined LC3

At Holy Trinity's Annual Congregational Meeting, on January 29, 2006, the congregation voted 73-8 in favor of becoming a member congregation of the umbrella confessional organization that has formed within the ELCA. The name of this confessional organization is "The Lutheran Churches of the Common Confession." In no way does this vote move Holy Trinity out of the ELCA, as some have said. Instead this vote allows Holy Trinity to join with a coalition of like-minded congregations to battle a pernicious and all-pervasive problem within our ELCA.

It is the purpose of this brief article to clarify exactly why the pastors and Congregation Council of Holy Trinity urged that Holy Trinity become a member of this confessional organization.

The state of Biblical scholarship within our denomination is in critical condition. The central issue facing our ELCA goes deeper than either the controversy over the name of God or the sexuality discussions that continue within the ELCA; those issues are secondary to the central one. The central issue is Jesus.

Since 1985, a very small but highly publicized group of American biblical scholars has been trying to separate the historical Jesus (a man who really lived and taught and was crucified) from the Christ of faith (a mythological creation of the early Church, according to these scholars). This small group is The Jesus Seminar, among whom is the Lutheran, Marcus Borg. Marcus Borg is a deeply religious man who wrote a book that has been extremely influential among the leadership of our denomination: *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*. But the Jesus he met again for the first time is not the Jesus of the New Testament.

Some background:

The quest for the historical Jesus is not new. In 1835, David Strauss wrote a book, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*. In this book, Strauss argued that the authors of the four canonical gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) wove a series of fantastic myths around a man named Jesus who really lived but whose power to work miracles and claims to be the Messiah were added to the story of his life by later biographers.

Even earlier, Thomas Jefferson, the American patriot and president, did the same sort of thing in the late 1700s. He admired Jesus as a moral man but assumed that none of the supernatural elements in the gospels could possibly be true. With scissors and paste, he cut out of the gospel accounts everything that he was convinced went against the laws of nature and reason. When he had finished his project, only 82 columns remained from the original 700 columns in his New Testament. Jefferson entitled his creation *The Life and Morals of Jesus*. His book ends as Jesus is laid in the tomb and the stone is rolled in front of the door.

Still earlier, our own Martin Luther taught that some New Testament writings are more authoritative than others on the basis of their theological worth (those writings that point to the Christ and show that we are saved by faith alone) coupled with scholarly, historical judgments regarding authorship by the apostles. Luther was a passionate lover of the biblical texts and of

the Christ to whom they pointed. He deeply believed that the failure of the church of his day could most clearly be seen by comparing the teachings of the (medieval) church with those of the earliest church and the person of Jesus, as we find them in the earliest texts of the New Testament. This core conviction spurred Luther to translate the Bible into the language of the people, and to use the Hebrew and Greek texts instead of the Latin texts for this translation. Luther's way of doing biblical scholarship led directly to the $\hat{=}$ historical critical $\hat{=}$ approach to the writings of the New Testament and studies of the origin of the very earliest Church that developed among German scholars in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Your pastors were thoroughly trained in this approach at Harvard Divinity School, and one of our most beloved professors was Dr. Helmut Koester, who has been a leading light in modern biblical scholarship. The historical critical method is an excellent tool. But, like a scalpel, it can also be used to kill. It would have been unimaginable to Luther that any form of biblical scholarship would ever define itself over against faith, however that is exactly what has happened. All of which brings us to The Jesus Seminar and the scholars who stand behind its work: Robert W. Funk, John Dominic Crossan, and the Lutheran, Marcus Borg.

The Jesus Seminar

The Jesus Seminar met for the first time in 1985. The Jesus Seminar is not affiliated with either the Society of Biblical Literature or the other international association for New Testament scholars, the Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas. It does not represent anything like a consensus view of scholars working in the New Testament. And it is a very small group. Their major publication, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, lists 74 $\hat{=}$ fellows $\hat{=}$ of the seminar. This is a very small number when placed against the 6,900 members of the Society of Biblical Literature, at least half of whom are New Testament scholars. The seminar claims to represent the cutting edge of New Testament Scholarship, but it actually does no such thing.¹

The Jesus Seminar has received wide media attention in this country, beginning with the way they voted on the sayings of Jesus within the Four Gospels. Each scholar offered his or her opinion on each statement by voting with a different colored bead: Red (Jesus undoubtedly said this); Pink (Jesus probably said something like this); Gray (Jesus did not say this, but the ideas are close to his); Black (Jesus did not say this; it represents a later tradition). Their conclusion was that only 20% of the sayings of Jesus in the New Testament were actually spoken by him. The other 80% were simply made up by the early church.

This should not surprise anyone, since the founder of the seminar, Robert Funk, says, $\hat{=}$ Matthew, Mark, Luke and John marketed the Messiah to make him conform to Christian doctrine that evolved after the death of Jesus ... a man, ironically, who rebelled against the doctrine of his time. $\hat{=}$ ² Funk says, $\hat{=}$ This isn't Jesus bashing ... we want to liberate Jesus. The only Jesus most people want is the mythic one. They don't want the real Jesus. They want the

¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, Harper San Francisco(1996)

²Robert Funk as quoted in the *San Jose Mercury News*, 12 Feb. 1994

one they can worship.³ In a keynote address to the Jesus Seminar fellows in 1994, Robert Funk described his real Jesus: Jesus did not ask us to believe that his death was a blood sacrifice, that he was going to die for our sins. Jesus did not ask us to believe that he was the messiah. He certainly never suggested that he was the second person of the trinity. In fact, he rarely referred to himself at all. Jesus did not call upon people to repent, or fast, or observe the Sabbath. He did not threaten with hell or promise heaven. Jesus did not ask us to believe that he would be raised from the dead. Jesus did not ask us to believe he was born of a virgin. Jesus did not regard scripture as infallible or even inspired.⁴

This new hermeneutic or hermeneutic of suspicion is a way of interpreting scripture that sees the received tradition of the Church (the creeds and the canon of the New Testament) as the key way that ancient bishops institutionalized the oppressive social structures of their own day. These bishops suppressed alternative stories of Jesus (stories which, as a result, were never included in the New Testament). Consequently, the new hermeneutic argues that this received tradition has made the church an institutionalized form of racism, sexism, homophobia, speciesism,⁵ and violence against women, children and the powerless.

The Jesus Seminar has most profoundly influenced the leadership of our denomination through the writings of the Lutheran and fellow of the Jesus Seminar, Marcus Borg. Borg is a New Testament scholar and deeply devout man who was raised as very conservative Lutheran, fell away from his faith for many years, and found himself reconnecting with Jesus through the historical-critical method. He tells the story of how this happened in his book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith*. He writes: Like Socrates, Jesus was a teacher of subversive wisdom. Like the Buddha, he had an Enlightenment experience. Like a shaman, he was a healer. Like Gandhi, he protested against a purity system.⁶ In fact, Jesus's mission was really an attack on the purity system, as he attempted to replace the politics of holiness (a Pharisaical concern for rules and status and exclusion) with the politics of compassion, which is about freedom and equality and inclusiveness.⁷ In Borg's writings, Jesus teaches nothing about God or about God's demands for

³ *Los Angeles Times*, 24 Feb. 1994

⁴ Robert W. Funk, The Gospel of Jesus and the Jesus of the Gospels, The Fourth R (November/December, 1993), p.8

⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, op cit p. 170.

⁶ Marcus Borg, Me and Jesus: The Journey Home, The Fourth R, (July/August 1993), p.9.

⁷ Marcus Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship*, pp 97-171

life in the kingdom; he had nothing to say about the forgiveness for sin or judgment. In his personal testimony, Borg states, “I do not believe that Christianity is the only way of salvation, or that the Bible is the revealed will of God, or that Jesus was the unique Son of God.”⁸ He also states, “the image of the historical Jesus as a divine or semi-divine figure, who saw himself as the divine savior whose purpose was to die for the sins of the world, and whose message consisted in preaching that, is simply not historically true.”⁹

Although it is easy to see how an uncritical embrace of the Jesus Seminar’s new hermeneutic would lead to the controversies within our denomination regarding the name of God, blessing of same-sex unions, and gay ordination, in fact those controversies are peripheral to the central issue. The central issue has to do with the state of Biblical scholarship within the church. The central issue is Jesus.

A Call to Faithfulness

As anyone knows who has access to the news, Christianity in America today is profoundly divided. But the nature of the division is not as simplistic as the news would have you believe. The division is not simply a matter of “the fundamentalists versus the liberals.” Nor is this division within any given denomination simply a matter of “the political progressives versus the political traditionalists” or of “the Democrats versus the Republicans” or of “the secular left versus the religious right.” Those simplistic distinctions may sell newspapers and keep the ratings up, but the real division lies deeper.

The real division is much more complex and has to do with defining **the precise purpose** of academic, critical biblical scholarship, **inside the Church.**

One of the great achievements of critical biblical scholarship has been the realization that the texts of Scripture are not immediately clear to modern readers. Before we can understand what a text means for us today, we have to understand what it meant to the writers of the New Testament. These writers used figures of speech, wrote in literary styles, and made allusions to other biblical passages that would have been easily understandable to their first hearers, but are not easily understandable to us today. (For example: If your right eye offends you, pluck it out.) Critical biblical scholarship reminds us that the contemporary mind can easily misunderstand what Scripture is saying.

However, it is one thing to say that the modern mind can misunderstand the point of the text, and it is quite another thing altogether to say (with the new hermeneutic) that most of the New Testament was written in order to support various agendas of the early church and that the writers were deliberately telling stories they knew were false (like the Nativity narratives or the

⁸ Borg, “Me and Jesus” (op. cit.) p.9

⁹ Borg, *Jesus, A New Vision*, (Harper and Row, San Francisco, 1987) p.7

stories of Jesus (physical Resurrection) in order to promote their ideological presuppositions.

What is needed right now in our denomination is a confessional organization that is committed to reminding our denomination that the purpose of biblical scholarship **within the Church** is to help believers connect with Jesus. The purpose of biblical scholarship within the Church is not to undercut the faith of the laity but to help them find the intersection between their own life experiences and the Real Jesus, the resurrected Lord whose transforming Spirit is alive and active in the worshiping community, the Church.

This confessional organization is needed to assert, as do our Lutheran Confessional writings, that the New Testament writers faithfully told us the honest truth about what Jesus Christ really did and taught for our eternal salvation. In these New Testament writings, we meet the Real Jesus, who defined by his life, death, and resurrection a way of living that is measured in terms of obedience to God and suffering rather than be disobedient, a way of living that is measured in terms of service and love.

We need a confessional organization that will lift up the possibilities for an honestly critical biblical scholarship within a church that remembers it is called to remain faithful to its Lord.

Such a confessional organization has come into existence. On January 29, 2006, Holy Trinity voted to become a member congregation of that organization. The organization's name is Lutheran Churches of the Common Confession.

For Additional Reading

Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, (Harper San Francisco, 1996) -- This small, engaging book by a serious New Testament scholar argues persuasively that Christian faith is founded not upon a "real Jesus" that scholarship can reconstruct, but on the resurrected Jesus proclaimed by the New Testament and Christian tradition. Dr. Johnson is the Robert W. Woodruff Professor of New Testament and Christian Origins at the Candler School of Theology, Emory University.

On the Internet:

For many interesting articles, do a Google search for *The New Hermeneutic + Borg*

Note especially:

The Second Coming of the Liberal Jesus by Leander E. Keck

The Paganization of New Testament Studies by Peter Jones

Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium by James F. Kay (a review of Robert Funk's book by the same title)

Salvation by trust? Reading the Bible faithfully, by Richard B. Hays (A fascinating address he gave to the Society of Biblical Literature in 1997)

The Jesus Seminar by Jimmy Williams

The Divine Authority of Scripture vs. The "Hermeneutic of Suspicion" by James Hitchcock

Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI To The Representatives of the Lutheran World Federation -- This address from Monday, 7 November 2005 speaks very positively about the extensive ecumenical dialogue that has gone on for many years between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation, and then warns: "We are all aware that our fraternal dialogue is challenged ... by a general climate of uncertainty regarding Christian truths and ethical principles which formerly went unquestioned. This common patrimony in certain cases is being undermined by changed

hermeneutical approaches. [△] In other words; our embrace of the new hermeneutic is threatening the continuation of this ecumenical dialogue.

Books by Fellows of The Jesus Seminar: (These should be in any good public library)

Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*

Jesus: A New Vision

John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*

The Essential Jesus

Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography

Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover and The Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic*

Words of Jesus

Robert W. Funk, *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium*

John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile*