

The Lost Gospel – Observations, Part 1

5 REASONS WHY PEOPLE WANT A CELIBATE JESUS

One of the great stories about *The Lost Gospel* is the reaction it has provoked. On the one hand, many who have engaged with the evidence have been receptive to the idea of a human Jesus who values sexuality and marriage and who is politically engaged. Some welcome this view as extremely liberating and an alternative to what has been taught in various churches over the centuries. Had Christianity evolved along these lines, rather than the way it did, we'd have a kinder, gentler religion than the one focusing on suffering and death.

Some, on the other hand, have found the message disturbing. The idea of a *human, Jewish, married* Jesus upsets a number of people. Some have read through the evidence. But some haven't – they simply become so steamed up just by headlines that they feel they have to resort to name-calling and venomous blogs to vent their anger.

So, why the wrath? What accounts for this visceral response? Here are some reasons why people want a celibate Jesus.

1. THEY THINK INSIDE PAUL'S BOX

One way of thinking about Christianity is to think of Jesus and his message through the eyes of Paul. Paul advanced a specific theology about Jesus. For him, Jesus was the Christ, the dying-rising savior God-human. Paul did away with the Torah, the Jewish Law (Galatians 3), portraying it as slavery (Galatians 5:1). He prayed that the hand of the circumcisers would slip so as to castrate themselves (Galatians 5:12). So no Jewish festivals for Paul, no Sabbaths, no Passover, no dietary laws, no circumcision – nothing Jewish.

That's one way of thinking about Christianity. It's a message about Jesus as a savior and it disconnects Jesus from his cultural context. Paul came on the scene sometime after Jesus' death, never having met Jesus of history, the charismatic teacher who roamed the Galilee and who taught about the Kingdom of God. Paul wasn't one of the original disciples, never enjoyed the 3-year mentoring process that Jesus' disciples had, and rarely refers to him in his letters. If we only had the letters of Paul we'd never know of the Sermon on the Mount, the parables, or the Lord's Prayer. But Paul's version of Christianity isn't the only way and it wasn't the earliest.

The movement that sprang from Jesus' teachings was led by James, Jesus' brother from the early 30's until his death in 62. We know of James from both Christian and Jewish sources and he preached a different message. For one thing, members of his group were obligated to follow the Torah, as did Jesus, and so they observed the Jewish festivals, the Sabbaths, the dietary laws and circumcision. They also regarded Jesus, their rabbi, as human. Their message focused on the coming Kingdom of God, that is, world transformation when the hated Romans would be swept away by God into the dustbin of history and the messianic kingdom would materialize. That was a vastly different way of understanding Jesus and it pre-dated Paul's revisionist history.

There were other early communities that came from Jesus, even a Church of Mary Magdalene, likely a fusion of Jewish and non-Jewish elements which saw Jesus as both divine and human. For them, Jesus' marriage was the basis of redemption.

And, in time, there were other groups.

Paul also introduced the idea of celibacy and approved of marriage solely on the grounds of complete loss of self-control (1 Corinthians 7: 9), hardly a recipe for wholesome family values. In defending celibacy and asexuality, he never appeals to the example of Jesus, something he would have done surely if Jesus were single.

Here's the problem: if you think of early Christianity through the eyes of Paul, then you'll think of sexuality as something to be repressed. You'd find it strange that Jesus, like other Jewish rabbis of his time, could be married ... and, indeed, was expected to be married.

But Paul wasn't the only game in town. There were other ways of thinking about Jesus, then and now. A human, Jewish, and, yes, married Jesus is, quite frankly, what we'd expect.

2. THEY THINK SEX IS DIRTY

The argument goes as follows: if Jesus is God, then how can God have sex? How could a holy being engage in something so impure? How could we ever look at Jesus as a holy person ever again if he experienced lust and had sexual relations?

The presuppositions of this argument are intriguing, that sex is somehow dirty, inimical to the divine purpose. That's a natural outgrowth of the writings of the New Testament that down play sexuality and marriage in favor of celibacy. Sexual renunciation, virginity and asceticism are strong components of biblical Christianity.

There's a problem with this argument, however. Two gospels (Matthew, Luke) put forward the idea of a virginal conception, that God in the form of the Holy Spirit overshadowed a young Jewish teenaged girl, roughly 13-16 years old, and caused her to become pregnant. That sounds very much like divine-human sex resulting in a virginal conception and, eventually, a virgin birth. That divine-human sexual encounter seems to be fine ... but not for Jesus.

The early church fathers took the idea of virginity a step further, thinking through the anatomical details. *The Infancy Gospel of James*, a mid-2nd century document that almost made it into the New Testament, puts forward the view that Mary's midwife checked to ensure that her hymen remained intact after she had given birth to Jesus. Such was the thoroughness of prurient early Christian writers to ensure virginity.

Most Christians, too, accept the idea of an immaculate conception, that is, that Mary's mother, Anna, conceived without any human male involvement. Again, a divine-human sexual encounter that seems to be fine for the majority of the world's Christians (Catholic, Orthodox)....but, again, not for Jesus.

A lack of models for family living, embracing sexuality and encouraging marriage is missing from the pages of the New Testament. This has befuddled Christian sexual ethics for two millennia. Some Christians today still cling to the idea that sexuality and Christianity are incompatible and so they think of a married Jesus as foreign to their faith.

Fortunately other gospels exist that view sexuality and marriage positively....but you have to look outside the New Testament for these.

3. THEY THINK JESUS WAS SOLELY DIVINE

Those who think that Jesus was divine object to a married Jesus on the grounds that divine beings cannot have – or, at least, shouldn't have – sexual and familial relations with humans. And so they reject out of hand any idea that he was married and had a family life.

The idea that Jesus was solely divine is a common error and one that was rejected early in Christian history. They called it 'docetism' and rejected it. The letter we call 2 John puts it this way: "Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh; any such person is the deceiver and the anti-Christ" (2 John 1:7). Strong language that! Traditional Christianity affirms that Jesus was both divine and human, fully human. The creeds of Christianity affirm this.

Failure to embrace the humanity of Jesus makes nonsense of several events in his life.

- For instance, Jesus is baptised by John for the remission of sin. This implies that Jesus was sinful.

- Secondly, at his crucifixion, did anyone die? If Jesus were fully divine, then he didn't die, since God by definition cannot die.
- Thirdly, if he did not engage in sexual relations and have children, then he would not have fulfilled the very first commandment in the bible, namely to be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1:28). If he didn't fulfill all things, then this would undermine his claim to being the Jewish messiah.

So there are good reasons to suppose that any theology about Jesus needs to include his humanity. The question is, however, what does Jesus being fully human mean? What does 'Jesus Christ coming in the flesh' mean? What is Christmas all about? If it doesn't mean being involved in the same sorts of challenges and issues we face on a daily basis, then what could it possibly mean?

Fortunately there are writings that portray Jesus as a family man. These exist, however, in gospels that are outside the writings of the New Testament.

4. THEY'VE BEEN TOLD THAT JESUS WAS CELIBATE

There is no writing that says Jesus was not married. Not one. The New Testament writings are silent on this point.

So on what authority are priests and ministers telling laypeople that he was unmarried? And what are they trying to protect?

5. THEY KNOW NOTHING OF CRITICAL BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP

Some laypeople are amazed that there has been several hundred years of scholarship that has looked at biblical writings in their historical and cultural context. As a result, they get easily angered that the findings of such scholarship contradict what they have been told in church.

They are startled to find out that scholars do not think the four gospels were written by close associates of Jesus (e.g. Matthew, John) or Paul (e.g. Mark or Luke). Most North American scholars view these texts as anonymous, written some 40-70 years after Jesus' death. They are only attributed to a Matthew, Mark, Luke and John just as other writings, not included in the New Testament, were attributed to Thomas, Philip, Mary Magdalene and even one is attributed to the Saviour himself.

They are also perplexed to learn that there were several different forms of early Christianity. Paul's Gentile Christianity was only one form. But James' group was another. These two communities differed on whether followers of Jesus are supposed to keep Jewish Law including circumcision, the Sabbath, Passover, the dietary laws (James, yes; Paul, no). They also held different views of Jesus (James, Jesus was human; Paul, Jesus was a divine-human).

Add in a Church of Mary Magdalene and a huge fuss is created.

They are also miffed to find out that there were gospels not included in the New Testament and are surprised to learn that the four which are included were decided upon in the 4th century. These are the gospels that reflected the faction of Christianity that the Roman Emperors Constantine and Theodosius favored as the one official religion of the empire. So political pressures played a major role in the selection of the 27 writings out of hundreds available for inclusion in the New Testament.

And they get angry when told that Jesus was human, Jewish and married.

Their anger is misplaced, however, for it often is directed towards researchers, the messengers of scholarship. They should be irritated by the priests and ministers who do not take the time to set the gospels in context. Most clergy, at least those from accredited theological seminaries, know what scholarship has learned. They fail, however, to convey these findings to their congregants. They should be asked by their followers why this is the case.

That's the proper location for anger.