

Apologetics Essay: **Quest For The Historical Jesus**
by David M. Coddington

Who was Jesus, really? That is the question that scholars who undertake the quest for the historical Jesus seek to answer. Many Christians may be puzzled by the idea that there is a need for a quest. Can we just look in the gospel books (the Books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) and find Jesus? According to critical scholars, the answer is 'no'. They see the gospel books as primarily an oral tradition that was edited by the early church. The task then for the scholar is to sift through the gospel books to distinguish between the Jesus who actually lived and the Jesus that the early church edited into, or out of, the gospel books (Meier 123).

The idea that 'everything in the gospel books is not historical fact' is the core belief of the scholars. Many would disagree strongly with this statement, so the question remains: Should an evangelical Christian take part in the quest for the historical Jesus? The answer is 'no'. Taking part in the quest is to look through the Scriptures with extreme skepticism. Viewing the gospel books this way destroys the nature of the Bible. The Bible would no longer be God's inspired word that is completely true and accurate, but rather an interpretation of a historical event by early religious people. The gospel books then would not reflect what actually happened, but the early church's understanding of what happened. This is unacceptable. How then can any of the Scriptures be trusted?

Scholars on the quest would then reply that it is necessary to glean through the gospel books and pick out the influence of the early church; leaving the historical Jesus to be seen clearly. The problem is that these judgments are completely based on guesswork. There is no "unbiased" text to compare the gospel books to. The scholar must use his imagination and decide whether a passage reflects the historical events based on gut-feeling (personal intuition).

Some scholars have devised criteria in order to judge whether a part of the gospel books is historical. The criteria include among others: embarrassment, discontinuity, and rejection by, or of, the early church (Meier 123-136). Even this method has a fundamental flaw. There is no text that tells exactly what the church believed before writing the gospel books. In addition, who is to decide whether the church's beliefs were based on the gospel books, or the gospel books' teaching based on the church's beliefs? It is up to the scholar then to imagine what the early church might have believed, and to imagine what they might have changed.

In consideration of these two arguments, an evangelical believer should not undertake the quest for the historical Jesus because it requires abandoning a belief in the historical veracity of the gospel books for an undertaking that is based entirely on conjecture and guesswork. Even though the quest in itself is bad however, there are a couple of beneficial parts of the quest for evangelical Christians.

First, the authors of the gospel books did have a theological purpose they wanted to fulfill and a message they wanted to communicate. It would be wrong to assume that the authors woodenly wrote down every event solely focused on history. It is important then to look for what each author was trying to communicate in his order of events, the dialogue recorded, and the language used. Each gospel book highlights Jesus in different ways.

That brings us to the second benefit of the quest. The quest makes us look at the character and person of Jesus as a whole, and who He is in each gospel book. Many times, discussions of Jesus fall on either ends of a spectrum. On the one end is focusing on the gospel accounts as a whole, while excluding each book's intention. And on the other end is focusing on single events in Jesus' life to the exclusion of all else. The quest helps us see the folly in both ends of the spectrum. Our understanding of Jesus should be somewhere in the middle of those two extremes. We can look at specific events in His life and draw conclusions; however, the context of the book should be taken into account as well as the overall storyline found in the gospel books.

In conclusion, this quest approach used by critical scholars to ascertain the historical Jesus is a flawed endeavor. It takes an incorrect view of the Bible and tries to make conclusions that are based on conjecture. As evangelical Christians, we need to have faith that the account of Jesus in the gospel books is true, and the theological intent of the authors was inspired by God. Despite the flawed nature of the endeavor, Christians can learn two valuable lessons from the quest: the authors of the gospel books had theological messages that need to be understood; and Jesus should be understood in light of those messages.

Works Cited:

Meier, J.P. "Criteria: How do we decide what comes from Jesus?" *The Historical Jesus in Recent Research*. Edited by J.D.G. Dunn and S. McKnight. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005. pp.123-144.

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