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Texts in Context

Preaching Jesus

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"So you want to preach Jesus? Wonderful. Which one?" While I have no idea whether such a conversation has ever taken place verbatim, I do know it has been played out in the experience of many a preacher. Week in and week out, preachers climb into their pulpits to proclaim the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. Much of this preaching follows a reading from one of the four gospels, the stories of Jesus found most compelling by the early church and included in the canonical New Testament. The task, at first glance, seems relatively straightforward.

Over time, however, even the only mildly astute reader begins to notice that the narratives offered by the four evangelists differ, sometimes in minor details, sometimes in major ones. More than that, the picture of Jesus that emerges from each of the gospels is also distinct.

Perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than in the readings appointed for Holy Week and Easter, where the lectionary displays the climactic scenes of the gospel (singular) drawn from several Gospels (plural) in the space of just a few days. In such a situation, the conscientious preacher may very well wonder how to transition, for instance, from the existential suffering of Mark's Jesus on Passion Sunday to the stoic, even heroic Jesus of John's account on Good Friday.

Easter Sunday similarly confronts the preacher with choices, particularly in the year of Mark, when one must decide whether to read the oldest version of Mark (as appointed, and with no appearance by Jesus) or one of the later endings (which sound more like the other Gospels, but which also come with instructions for

The Bible presents not just one picture of Jesus—in fact, not even just four. Preachers need to find consequent ways to proclaim Jesus that honor both their theological confession and their careful reading of biblical texts.

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snake handling), or to skip the confusion altogether by reading John's account (always appointed as a primary option for Easter).

But while this challenge is perhaps most obvious at certain times of the year, it is always before us: Which Jesus do we preach? Or, to put it another way, how many versions of Jesus *can* we preach without inviting confusion and/or skepticism about the value of the gospel witnesses.

In this essay I will address these questions first by surveying some of the major historical developments of this issue, and then by considering—and reconsidering—three popular solutions to the dilemma posed. In light of this discussion, I'll offer a proposal for preaching Jesus in a manner that is both faithful to Scripture's varied witness and fitting to one's immediate context.

Historical Roots of the Challenge

Questions arising from the varied portrayals of Jesus in the New Testament have persisted from shortly after the writing of the gospels to our own day. Highlighting three stages of the development of this challenge—touching on the early, middle, and recent periods of the church—will allow us to survey that history with necessary dispatch and construct a framework in which to consider current proposals. The first stage comes in the middle of the second century, when a church leader named Tatian offered a harmonized version of the four gospels that remained popular in his homeland of Syria for several centuries. Over time, however, the church concluded that however problematic it might be on some counts, reading four not entirely consistent gospel accounts side by side offered a richer, deeper, and ultimately truer witness to Jesus than reading any single gospel, or even a blended version of the four.

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In light of that decision, the church had to grapple with making sense of its own confession about Jesus in light of four distinct narratives (not to mention the reflections of Paul and the other writers of the New Testament). The means by which to navigate such questions was the evolving dogmatic teaching of the church. Beginning with the Trinitarian and christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries—which were occasioned precisely by the different portrayals of Jesus in the gospels—the church wended its way carefully through various statements about the nature of God and of Christ that tried to set out boundaries of what one could and could not affirm about Jesus based on the accounts of Scripture.

The second stage in our survey occurs in the late Middle Ages and the Refor-

mation. By the Middle Ages, the dogmatic affirmations that had guided the church through previous controversy and the many and various traditions that had accrued around those affirmations comprised the mainstay of reflection about Jesus. What mattered, that is, was less what any New Testament author said about Jesus than what the church had decreed about him. While ecclesial dogma was based on centuries of interpreting the biblical documents, there was nevertheless an undeniable displacement of Scripture by church tradition.

It is on this stage that the Reformation concern for *sola scriptura* was played out, as Martin Luther and company insisted that the Bible is not simply the font for theological reflection but also and always its norm. Insisting on a return to understanding Scripture in its literal sense (that is, in its proper historical and cultural context, as opposed to a "literalist" reading of Scripture, devoid of context), the Reformers demanded that all of the church's theology arise from, and be accountable to, a close and careful reading of the Bible. And at the core of Scripture, the Reformers contended, was God's paradigmatic work in Christ, so that the phrase *solus Christus*—that is, interpreting all of the Bible in light of Christ—became the hermeneutical key to all convictions about the authority of Scripture.

The third and most recent stage in the church's history of grappling with the varied pictures of Jesus came about as an unintended consequence of the Reformation insistence upon *sola scriptura*. However useful the call to reassert the primacy of Scripture was for the reform of the church in the sixteenth century, it exercised unforeseen influence in the nineteenth. For it was precisely a close and careful reading of the biblical traditions that led to the discovery of the multiple traditions, forms, and redactions that comprise the New Testament, and thereby occasioned the keen awareness of the differences among the evangelists' portraits of Jesus contained therein.

Since the advent of form and source criticism in particular, as well as developments in social anthropology and archeology, speculation about not only the Jesus of the four gospels but especially the Jesus behind the gospels has run rampant. Hence, today, the question of "which Jesus" to preach is more pressing than ever.

Solutions Old and New

1. Narrative Harmonization

Three contemporary solutions to the challenge presented by multiple pictures of Jesus stem from each of the three periods just surveyed. The first relates closely to the earliest period and is still among the most popular: narrative harmonization. This takes shape in two forms. Its more assertive form finds representation all the way from Tatian's *Diatessaron* (literally, "through four") to many of our contemporary Good Friday services. The solution is to read and preach a version of the gospel—or in the case of Good Friday, the crucifixion—that has melded the various details of the four gospels into a single, harmonized whole.

In its softer form, narrative harmonization is nearly universally represented

in conservative Protestantism. The object in these circles, however, is not actively to harmonize differences but to deny their existence at all or, failing that, to explain them away. In volumes running five- and six-hundred pages long, conservative scholars explain, for instance, that Jesus offered his most famous sermon twice, once on a mountain (the sermon Matthew famously records) and once on a plain (the one Luke heard), rather than to entertain the possibility that the two evangelists reported the same sermon differently to serve distinct theological ends. The goal of such historical and exegetical gymnastics is always to erase any appearance of difference so as to offer to the world a consistent picture of Jesus.

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Whether we consider its assertive or more passive forms, it is difficult to resist the common-sense pragmatism and appeal of narrative harmonization. Four different stories can, quite frankly, be rather confusing and even undermine one's attempt to proclaim the gospel. What lawyer, after all, would call four witnesses to the stand knowing their testimonies differ at critical moments? Harmonizing or dismissing differences offers a comprehensive and consistent picture of Jesus that removes the challenge we named at the outset.

But while there is some appeal to the consistency such an approach offers, the significant disadvantage is that it loses sight of the distinct confession about Jesus that each evangelist makes. Such a concern was ultimately what led the church to reject Tatian's effort.

2. Confessional Reduction

A second proposal to reconcile differing portrayals of Jesus became prominent shortly after the Reformation; I would describe it as confessional reduction. By the time most preachers have given even a half dozen sermons, they have developed a relatively clear, if often unconscious, sense of what is at the heart of the New Testament witness to Jesus. They have, that is, developed a theological lens by which to interpret the gospels and, indeed, as the Reformers called for, all of Scipture.

There is, again, significant appeal to this option in that it lends preachers a hermeneutical key, or theological organizing principle, by which to make sense of the various nuances and differences of opinion about Jesus not only in the gospels but also throughout the writings of the New Testament. More often than not, such an organizing principle is drawn from one's theological tradition and therefore is at the heart of a preacher's self-understanding.

But while such a confessional lens offers its own consistency, and even more a desirable clarity, to preaching, the challenge is to avoid allowing one's confessional

interpretation of Scripture to trump any of the discrete pictures offered by the evangelists. This challenge becomes greatest when the Jesus of one's confessional tradition bears little resemblance to the Jesus of a particular biblical passage or, more ominously, a particular evangelist. "I really don't like preaching Matthew," you might hear a preacher confess in a moment of vulnerability, "he always seems so interested in the law." While such preferences—whether on theological, literary, or even temperamental grounds (that is, some may be drawn to what appears to be a certain mysticism in John or existential bent in Mark)—are perhaps understandable, they can impose a predictable "sameness" on all of one's reading and preaching of Scripture. At its worst, no matter what part of the Bible was just read in worship, the sermon becomes an exercise in validating one's theological tradition on the basis of—and at times in spite of!—the theme sounded by the discrete passage.

3. Historical Reconstruction

We may characterize a third and more recent attempt to resolve our question as historical reconstruction. Advanced by proponents of the twentieth-century "historical Jesus quests," this approach would have us abandon the theologically conditioned and ecclesiastically authorized pictures of Jesus of the New Testament and search instead for the Jesus of history lurking behind the church's distorted portrayals of him. The promise of such an approach is bold: if one can find what the historical Jesus did, said, and meant, then we are no longer captive to influences of patriarchy and power that so colored early discussions of Jesus and continue to dominate the preaching of the gospel to this day.

The appeal of such an approach is no less significant: Who, after all, given the chance to meet "the real Jesus," would settle for the caricatures of church and theological tradition, even those traditions represented in the Bible? And, indeed, there are more than a few difficult, or even embarrassing, scenes about Jesus in our Bible that could, to put it mildly, use some help (the occasional references to "gnashing teeth" or Jesus' calling the Syrophoenician woman "dog" come immediately to mind). Little wonder, then, that preachers occasionally dip into recent Jesus research to overcome some of the harsher pictures of Jesus.

But the downsides of such an approach are equally significant. First, if we have trouble with four distinct pictures of Jesus, what are we do with twenty-four—or whatever number—of Jesus biographies one might have available. The simple fact of the matter is that there is no more agreement among contemporary evangelists of the historical Jesus than there was among the four original evangelists of the New Testament. That is, one must still choose and, having chosen, read and preach the New Testament witness through such a filter.

Second, the historical option, while seeking ostensibly to overcome the tendency of theology (whether of the early or later church) to trump history, succumbs to its own theological and ideological biases. The historical Jesus one posits, to put it another way, often aligns remarkably well with the theological and political convictions one had before searching for Jesus in the first place. The homiletical

result, again, is to perpetuate a certain "sameness"—this time more political or ideological than confessional—in one's preaching and teaching of Jesus.

This is not to underestimate the challenge one's historical Jesus might pose —the demands of one's reconstructed Jesus might be severe—but merely to acknowledge that while one may be scolded by the historical Jesus, one is rarely surprised by the Jesus we discover hiding in the folds of history. Biography, as it turns out, often deeply shapes theology. As Albert Schweitzer once remarked, when one peers into the deep well of historical Jesus research, one is more likely than not to see one's own reflection looking back.

Looking Back, Leaning Forward

The question before us, then, is whether we can discover a way forward that offers something of the consistency and clarity of the three solutions we have considered without getting mired in their significant drawbacks. Toward this end, I have three related observations and, from these, a modest proposal.

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First, there is no avoiding the need for theological discernment in wrestling with the varied pictures of Jesus present in the New Testament. To put it another way: even, and perhaps especially, in biblical studies, theology matters. Whether it is the christological formulations of the fifth century, the reform of the church on the basis of *solus Christus* of the sixteenth, or the reformulations of the historical Jesus in the twentieth, there is no neutral, unbiased reading of Scripture. Ironically, the moment one imagines having attained an objective stance, he or she is in greatest danger of succumbing to unnamed biases. For this reason, we should surrender the hope of simply "preaching Jesus" and recognize that the Jesus we preach is always a matter of interpretation, and therefore confession.

Second, recognizing the need for a theological and hermeneutical lens by which to read and interpret Scripture, however, is not the same as ignoring or flattening the distinct voices within Scripture. That means that exegesis remains as important as theology. Left to its own devices, theology eventually creates its own echo chamber where it can only hear its own reflections on Scripture rather than Scripture itself (and over time ends up listening only to its reflections on its own reflections). The Reformers were right: Scripture is both source and norm for theology, and so, careful, imaginative, and close reading of Scripture remains an imperative.

Third, while both theology and exegesis are necessary, they must live in a dynamic tension, regularly supporting and challenging each other. From this point of

view, one approaches the Bible and its portrayals of Jesus with a sense, a belief, an expectation of who and what Jesus is (the task of theology) but always ready to adjust, question, even alter or adapt that theological construction in light of what we discover through our careful reading (the task of exegesis). This hermeneutical dance, while sometimes delight, must also be relentless.

On the basis of these intertwined observations, I would suggest recalling an older practice of the church that has fallen out of vogue in recent years: *Sachkritik* (literally, "content criticism"), the practice of interpreting the whole through its most central material or content.[1] In short, *Sachkritik*, as I use it here, attempts to understand discrete passages of Scripture in relation to the core testimony of the biblical witness.[2] This is not only relevant when it comes to the question of preaching Jesus, but it is paramount, as one's formulation of Jesus typically stands at the center of one's hermeneutical enterprise.

In the past, *Sachkritik* has often drawn critical fire for its tendency to devolve into what I named above as "confessional reduction" and thereby determine from the outset the meaning of any and all biblical passages based on a predetermined conclusion about the center of Scripture. Those committed to *Sachkritik*, critics claim, either twist passages to fit their interpretive mold, ignore passages that don't fit that template, or, worst of all, denigrate or even exorcise such passages altogether (the persistent misunderstanding of the Reformation's "canon within a canon").

These difficulties can be overcome, I believe, with two amendments to traditional formulations of *Sachkritik*. First, we must always remember that the theological and biblical formulations that offer us a coherent and central picture of Jesus are always a matter of confession, not proof, and can therefore never be a settled matter. The dynamic, hermeneutical tension between theology and exegesis I called for above simply cannot be eliminated. One's picture of Jesus will always be evolving based on one's experience with Scripture and the world, and so we might as well be cognizant of, and intentionally participatory in, that process. Maintaining this tension should reduce the potential for employing one's theological lens reductionistically to flatten the distinct witness of Scripture.

Second, the genius of the church's early decision against harmonization was in recognizing that four pictures offered not simply a richer picture of Jesus but also a more relevant one. It is important to realize that our gospels were contextual documents, written to address the needs of particular and varied communities of

[1]While the practice of *Sachkritik* has most recently been associated with Rudolf Bultmann's work in the middle of the century just past (particularly his commitment to existentialist understandings of "authentic Being"), its presence can be detected in Augustine's interpretative key built around "faith, hope, and love"; Luther's focus on justification by grace through faith; and more recent liberation and feminist approaches emphasizing the plight of the poor or marginalized.

[2]*Sachkritik* has sometimes been used in a way that assumes the interpreter is privy to insights, especially modern ones, that permit simple rejection of the message of the text. Here, rather, I mean viewing particular texts in light of fuller or more central biblical themes. The particular text is not thereby dismissed, but it is placed into critical conversation with the broader biblical witness.

faith. Luke, for example, while he may have known of Mark, miracle stories of Jesus, and other bits and pieces of the story (what he calls "eyewitnesses and servants of the word," 1:2), nevertheless writes a new Gospel to address the particular needs and concerns of his community. Which means that the varied dimensions of Jesus we discover in the Bible are not only occasionally problematic but also regularly promising, full of potential for our proclamation.

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In this light, it is valuable not only to pay attention to the consistent or dominant elements of the various portrayals of Jesus by which we fashion our hermeneutical lens, but also to heed the inconsistent or unique elements that may not only challenge our sense of the material content of the evangelists' witness but also aid us in responding to the varied contextual situations in which we find ourselves preaching. Four distinct portrayals originally offered to four distinct communities of faith lend us a multitude of possibilities to preach Jesus in a manner that is as fitting to the context as it is faithful to the Bible.

To return briefly to our opening example, perhaps the choices presented us this Holy Week and Easter are something to celebrate rather than dread. That is, depending on the situation of your community, highlighting the heroic Jesus of John's passage may be just what a community struggling with the rampant foreclosures and loss of employment of this recession needs. Or maybe not. Perhaps, instead, they need to hear Jesus' cry of dereliction so that their own laments are validated and affirmed. Or, perhaps both are called for, and your ability to offer your hearers a multifaceted picture of Jesus may help them come to know better a Savior who can speak to their multifaceted lives. Similarly with the Easter texts: you must first listen carefully to the needs and situation of your congregation and then, and only then, discern which resurrection scene to preach and how to do so.

As even these brief examples highlight, only the preacher "on the ground," so to speak, can make these kinds of determinations. This is not to make light of the complexities of the various portrayals of Jesus, but rather to see in those complexities the promise of a gospel that is both succinct enough to be accessible and complex enough to be taken seriously in our complicated world.

Three suggestions, then, in conclusion: First, you already have a hermeneutical lens, a picture of Jesus, that helps you make sense not only of the gospels but of all Scripture. We all do. So articulate yours more explicitly so that (a) you can use it more effectively and (b) you can use all Scripture to affirm, stretch, or challenge it

so that the lens does not become more important than the book you're reading with it.[3] Second, pay attention to the discrete witness of the passage you are reading. When you find a text—or in our case, a particular portrayal of Jesus—challenging, don't run right over it but listen to its witness and ask (a) what it might have to offer your own picture of Jesus and (b) under what circumstances might you want to affirm this one. And don't forget that it's okay to struggle—even in the pulpit on occasion—with the varied witness of Scripture to Jesus. You and your hearers will emerge with a more mature faith for the effort. Third, whether it be Easter Sunday or any other preaching occasion, whatever choice you make about which dimension of Jesus to preach, do so in good conscience, knowing that there is no avoiding such a choice. But also do so in bold faith, trusting that you, the preacher, along with your people, are not justified by your choices, decisions, or even your preaching but by grace. For God will use your words as God has used the words of all those who have striven to preach Jesus through the centuries, not because our words are good, but because God is both good and faithful. ⊕

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[3]If you're not aware of what your hermeneutical lens is, read through a couple months of your sermons—or, better yet, have someone else read through a number of sermons—and see what regular themes and images consistently appear.