

Seeking to be Honest about Jesus

Many years ago I became an Associate member of the Jesus Seminar. The Jesus Seminar was founded by Hoosier native, Robert Funk, a graduate of Butler University and the Christian Theological Seminary of Indianapolis. Though I've never attended any of the Seminar's meetings or seminars, I've received regular mailings, including the bi-monthly publication, *The Fourth R*.

The primary focus of the Seminar during Funk's lifetime was the attempt to discern the authentic teaching and the authentic acts of Jesus of Nazareth. To those not fully versed in critical biblical scholarship, the work of the Seminar probably seemed radical if not sacrilegious, for it involved making judgments regarding which portions of the New Testament Gospels provide historically true reports of what Jesus said and did, and which do not. Moreover, the Seminar members came to these judgments by collaborative work that culminated in the unconventional act of voting on selected passages, then making the results available to the public.

During my Divinity School years, I concentrated in biblical studies. I've always seen the work of the Seminar in a positive light. As few lay folks know, critical biblical scholarship since the end of the 19th century, if not before, had been rather skeptical about finding historically authentic material in the Gospels. The Jesus Seminar actually judged a significant portion of the teachings attributed to Jesus in the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) to be authentic, or likely so. Furthermore, these judgments represented a consensus of scholars working together, so did not represent merely some individual scholar's opinion. The Jesus Seminar provided a sounder basis for discerning the central teachings and acts of Jesus than anything else of which I am aware.

The work of the Jesus Seminar remains controversial. Some biblical scholars disparage as pretense the effort to discern historically authentic Jesus material. Others, theologically more orthodox or conservative, or simply less critical in outlook, are inclined to accept greater portions of the Gospels as historically reliable. Some scholars from each of these groups, and many others, privilege theological over historical criteria, opting to define the heart of Christian teaching in terms of creeds and doctrinal traditions rather than adhering primarily to the life and words of Jesus.

I've always had scruples against presenting as words or acts of Jesus anything that does not seem historically warranted. Consequently, I am most grateful for the work of the Jesus Seminar.

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