

The Challenge of Jesus

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Nine years ago, Tom Wright, Bishop of Durham, prolific first-century historian and former Canon Theologian of Westminster Abbey, published an important book with the above title. It is devoted to two questions that in my experience of the Anglican and Pentecostal tradition have received little attention from pastors and lay teachers alike, myself included: why do we need a fresh historical understanding of Jesus, and how would such an understanding affect Christian discipleship today? In this article, I want to echo Tom Wright's concerns and, thereby, in a small way close a gap I have left unattended for far too long.

A well-known feature of Tom Wright's style, that he never minces words for the sake of being 'nice', becomes rather obvious early in the book. In second line of the preface we read, "Many Christians have been, frankly, sloppy in their thinking and talking about Jesus, and hence, sadly, in their praying and in their practice of discipleship." This line leaves us in no doubt about the importance of the subject he is addressing.

He continues, "We cannot assume that by saying the word 'Jesus', and still less the word 'Christ', we are automatically in touch with the real Jesus who walked and talked in first-century Palestine ... We are not at liberty to manufacture a different Jesus." Since the Christian traditions have often radically misunderstood the picture of Jesus in the Gospels, how can we ensure that our image of Jesus is as much as possible in line with the original?

We don't have to be rocket scientists to figure out that if our picture of Jesus is skewed based on Christ-figures shaped by Christian imagination (even a Protestant evangelical imagination may be twisted), our discipleship will be faulty, which would have serious implications for the church.

Before I turn to Tom Wright's central concern, let me highlight its importance by making two more points. One has to do with the Bible, the other with truth. We say we believe the Bible, but this does not mean we must not ask fresh questions about Jesus. Conversely, we consider certain things 'biblical' according to our tradition and then leave it at that. But declaring something 'biblical' does not exempt us from the hard task of critically examining the historical context afresh. Sometimes it may be necessary to read the Bible through the eyes of an unbelieving culture that confronts us with questions we have never thought of before. Beyond that, we must be equipped to decide which parts of the Bible to take metaphorically and which literally. This requires much rethinking and study. Next, as Tom Wright puts it, Christians must not be afraid of truth. This means

we must not play it so safe that we reduce the Bible to set of pious platitudes. For the sake of truth, we must instead probe for deeper meaning, risking that even our fondest understanding may have to be left behind when new light shines on the text.

But back to the main question: why is the study of the historical Jesus crucial for discipleship and for the church? First, if we neglect it, we are liable to make Jesus in our own image. In that case, Jesus' stiff challenge to us is muted and our spiritual lives are rendered shallow and powerless. Second, for any human relationship to flourish, wrong assumptions, false impressions and misunderstandings must be brought into the open and corrected. How much more does this apply for our relationship with Jesus? Third, for the sake of the mission of the church and its future, the model of Jesus we hold up before the world and before the next generation is vital. Here again, we cannot escape some probing questions. How do we, in personal conduct and congregational expression, reflect the 'original'? How does our model of Jesus attract people today? Can we offer hope in the face of cultural disintegration and widespread skepticism? Is our model of discipleship strong and resilient enough to interrogate every aspect of today's world in the light of what Jesus has achieved? Can we, based on a truer image of Jesus, present our generation with a more credible entry point into the 'Kingdom of God' as Jesus proclaimed it?

If we find these questions unsettling, we may be ready to face another one: what are we to do? Let me in closing suggest a few practical answers:

- Admit that our view of Jesus may be skewed.
- Read Tom Wright's book with great care (*The Challenge of Jesus*, London: SPCK, 2000).
- Study afresh what the gospels are actually saying about Jesus the Jew in his first-century Galilean setting.
- Ask what integrity would demand of us as individuals and as congregations in the light of Jesus' challenge.
- Discover, perhaps for the first time, how his message would interrogate Western culture and its Australian subset. Ask whether Jesus would have something to say about the claim that Australia is a Christian nation, to the badly disguised verbal violence during parliamentary debates masquerading as 'civil righteousness', or to our idolatrous devotion to sport? And, dare we subject a national icon like Anzac Day to the scrutiny of Jesus' inspection? How would answers to these questions affect our discipleship and our public stance today?
- Reflect on the shape of the church by asking how local congregational expressions are or are not a credible representation of Jesus in our time. Consider the challenges that lie ahead, especially for the next generation. How can we be a prophetic voice in this context?

While Jesus called individuals to follow him, developing answers to these questions belongs to the teaching office of the church. If the transforming message of the Gospel is to be brought to the world in our time, those who are called to equip the saints must wrestle afresh with the challenge of Jesus. Tom Wright's book offers a compelling starting point.