

Footnote 19 of my essay, "Hoax? Myth? Or Literally True?"
By Pastor Gary Jensen

19. Historian Chauncey Sanders lists three tests in his Introduction to Research in English Literary History. (Macmillan, 1952), p.143f, ** and seven factors are cited by C. Behan McCullagh in his Justifying Historical Descriptions. (Cambridge, 1984), p.19f., as criteria for valid analysis of historical documents. ** On the basis of these criteria, John Warwick Montgomery in History and Christianity. (Bethany, 1965), and ** William Lane Craig in "Did Jesus Rise From the Dead?" M. Wilkins and J.P. Moreland, ed. Jesus Under Fire. (Zondervan, 1995), p.141f, respectively, vindicate the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. ** Applying the *Federal Rules of Evidence* used in the United States Courts of Law, attorney Pamela Binnings Ewen "proves" the resurrection of Jesus based on a preponderance of evidence. See her Faith on Trial. (Broadman and Holman, 1999). Indeed, in personal correspondence to me she further stated that the evidence would actually prevail under the standard of a *criminal* trial (beyond a reasonable doubt).

Among those who work **outside** of the normal canons of historical research is ***The Jesus Seminar***, a gathering of the skeptical-minded whose conclusions are published in Robert Funk, ed. The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus. (Polebridge, 1993). Their emotionally driven desire to *stick it to the fundamentalists* (p.1f,5) should not be confused with valid historical inquiry. Far from even attempting historical fairness, their project is a stacked deck of hostile **presuppositions** and questionable assumptions designed to yield only the outcome they desire. The position my essay represents doesn't fall under the same charge since the presuppositions on which mine rests are capable of yielding a number of possible conclusions, including those which, if true, would damage historic Christianity. Critics who are enamored with Cartesian doubt (p.32) would do well to apply the same doubt to the following criteria:

First, they reject miracle stories out-of-hand as impossible (implied p.2). Thus their whole enterprise is poisoned at the outset because, in advance of any inquiry, many "conclusions" are already decided in the negative.

Second, they **presume** the Four Gospels to be dated long after the fact, error-ridden, and inferior to other contemporaneous sources (p.4). Yet they are eager to give credit to spurious works appearing more than a century after the close of the N.T. For example, they give the highly problematic apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas* at least equal weight with the canonical Gospels (p.15f, 26). They also argue that a so-called *Gospel of Q* (p.13f), which they allege is older than our Four Gospels, portrays a "primitive" and non-miraculous Jesus with no messianic trappings (p.32f).

Third, they **presume** the first Christians weren't interested in history, and willingly put words into Jesus' mouth to fulfill their own needs. Under their *distinctive discourse* criterion (p.30f), the only words they accept as authentically from Jesus are those that differ from the concerns of both the early Church and the surrounding Judaistic culture.

Fourth, they presume the Christian community invented words and events in Jesus' life to fulfill Old Testament prophecy. For example, John Dominic Crossan describes the Gospels "not as *history remembered*, but *prophecy historicized*," in Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography. (Harper-Collins, 1994), p.145.

Fifth, they view apologetic attempts with suspicion and presume **only** scholarship producing *negative* results is academically sound (John Dominic Crossan. *Ibid.* p.XI).

For firsthand reading of *Seminar* writers see also Marcus Borg. The God We Never Knew. (Harper, 1997). ** Marcus Borg in Marcus Borg and N.T. Wright. The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions. (Harper, 1999). ** John Dominic Crossan. The Birth of Christianity. (Harper, 1998). ** *Ibid.* Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography. (Harper Collins, 1994), ** and Robert Funk, ed. The Acts of Jesus: What Did Jesus Really Do? (Polebridge, 1998).

IN REBUTTAL, the above opposition to miracle is based on an outmoded 19th century view of science and, in the context of naturalistic criteria, commits the logical fallacy of *begging the question* (assuming what one seeks to prove). This essay is not an appeal to uncritically accept every miracle claim we encounter. But Chesterton, (*Op.cit.* (15), p.150) rightly assigns the term *dogmatist* where it actually belongs by writing, "*Somehow...an extraordinary idea has arisen that **disbelievers** in miracles consider them coldly and fairly, while believers in miracles accept them only in connection with some dogma. The fact is quite the other way. The believers in miracles accept them...because they have evidence for them. The disbelievers in miracles deny them...because they have a doctrine against them.*"

Second, their saddling of the burden of proof onto the Gospels instead of onto the critics violates the entire tradition of historical research up to the present. Wayne Booth argues rightly that "*Abstract commands to 'doubt pending proof' [ought to be replaced] with [what is] the ancient and natural command to 'assent pending disproof,'*" in Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent. (U. of Chicago Press, 1974), p.101. ** Louis Gottschalk writes, "*A document should be assumed to be trustworthy unless, under burden of proof, it is shown to be untrustworthy,*" in Understanding History: A Primer in Historical Method. (Alfred Knopf, 1969), p.89. ** The apocryphal Gospel of Thomas was heavily influenced by gnosticism, (2nd century, secret knowledge cults) and is therefore dated by the majority of scholars to the mid-next century **after** Christ. See John Meier. A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus. v.I. (Doubleday, 1991), p.124-166. ** Likewise, the *Seminar's* reliance on the so-called *Gospel of Q* is not sound. While other Gospels undoubtedly circulated (Luke 1:1), Q is nonetheless merely a hypothetical document; not an actual text that can be examined.

Principles behind their **third** presumption were **rejected by secular historians** decades ago (Edgar Krentz. The Historical Critical Method. (Fortress, 1975), p.78f). It absurdly leads to a Jew stripped of His ethnicity, and to a teacher whose followers rarely quoted their leader. And their portrayal fails to account for the strong reactions of His contemporaries by reducing Him to an insipid eccentric, powerless to create the strong reactions either against Him that resulted in His death, or for Him in the movement that turned their world upside-down (Acts 17:6). The notion that the first Christians weren't

interested in Jesus' earthly words requires evidence of a kind not remotely produced. And who is supposed to have invented those world-changing words critics allege were put into His mouth? Writes John Bright, "*It is far easier to credit such...insight to Jesus Himself—who... was one of the great creative minds in history--than to His early disciples, who were, for the most part, humble and very ordinary men.*" The Kingdom of God. (Abingdon, 1953), p.209. ** The so-called "synoptic problem" (Funk. Five Gospels. p.10f) is irrelevant to the matter of Jesus' resurrection since it does not follow from borrowing that their material had to have been invented. And the *passion* sections of the synoptic Gospels so differ from one another that their contents can't be accounted for from cross-borrowing on any count.

Fourth, for reasons described on pages 10 and 11, there were no motives for Jews to have been interested in a crucified peasant that would have led them to invent words and deeds corresponding to Messianic prophecy.

Fifth, arrogantly assuming as true what they then seek to demonstrate is one more example of the logical fallacy, *begging the question*. Crossan is astonishingly oblivious to his own attempts to defend his position.

For in depth critique of the tendencies of the Jesus Seminar see William Lane Craig in Paul Copan, ed. Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up? A Debate Between William Lane Craig and John Dominic Crossan. (Baker, 1998). ** Luke Timothy Johnson. The Real Jesus. (Harper, 1996). ** C.S. Lewis. Christian Reflections. (Collins, 1980), p.191f, ** Wilkins and Moreland. *Op.cit.* (19), ** N.T. Wright. Jesus and the Victory of God. (Fortress, 1996).

The entirety of the essay, "Hoax? Myth? Or Literally True" may be accessed at my website: www.christianityontheoffense.com

Dr. Marcus Borg, Ph.D., and fellow of the Jesus Seminar, gave a series of lectures titled, *Revisioning Christianity at the Millennium: Moving from Dogma to Dramatic Faith*," at Bethel Lutheran Church of Shoreline on October 30 and 31, 1998. I attended these lectures, publicly challenged him, and wrote the following letter in response.

November 17, 1998

Pastor James Schoeld
Bethel Lutheran Church of Shoreline
Shoreline, Washington

Dear Jim,

I sincerely enjoyed seeing you just a few Saturdays ago. I appreciate the ways you warmly greet and encourage me at each encounter. I must, however, express my dismay at the Sno-King Cluster's choice for a speaker this Fall.

It was out of a desire to be fully informed that, having already read some of his books, I came to hear Marcus Borg in person. I listened carefully and respectfully. Now I consider that I am entitled to offer my judgment. Marcus Borg is not a Christian. Indeed, for the reasons cited below, he ought to be judged an outright enemy of orthodox Christianity. This is not an overstatement. His conclusions exclude not only fundamentalism, but the central Christological positions of historic Christianity right up to the present, and every current mainline Christian Church, including the ELCA.

By Marcus Borg's methodology, nothing whatever remains of the 2nd article of the Apostles' Creed except the words "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died..." No miraculous birth is left standing, no life of miracles, only a few of the words attributed to Him by the early Church, no burial, no resurrection, and no 2nd coming. Additionally, no personal messianic claim on Jesus' part remains. Neither does the atonement in any traditional sense of the term remain intact, and correspondingly, nor does any actual command that one must find salvation in Christ.

But Dr. Borg is not only anti-Christian. His methodology, together with that of his associates in the *Jesus Seminar*, is judged by many to be seriously flawed. This criticism comes not only from self-described conservatives, but also from such quarters as N.T. Wright, Howard Clark Kee, Luke Timothy Johnson, and the New Testament faculty of Luther Seminary.

In addition to his methodology, it must be said that Borg's conclusions are utterly impotent to explain the universally acknowledged brute facts that a large number of Jews deified a human being, crowned as their Messiah one who had died a cursed death on a cross, and willingly went to their own deaths to propagate what they called their good message.

I must express dismay that, instead of highlighting speakers that encourage Christian belief, people such as Dr. Borg are given a forum from our pulpits to erode and destroy the "faith once delivered to the saints." I consider the evidence to be very strong in support of the central Christian claims about Jesus Christ. We ought to be shouting our message from the housetops rather than conceding to the world. I wrote the enclosed essay [on this website titled, "*Hoax? Myth? Or Literally True?*"] on Jesus' bodily resurrection to the end that agnostics would give serious attention to the supportive body of evidence. Nothing Marcus Borg said moved me to retract anything I have written. To the contrary, in response to his flimsy answer to my question at the end of the session, I have added that interchange to endnote 50. Let me just add that he offered as one possible motive for inventing the empty tomb stories that simple-minded Christians might be encouraged. But by Borg's own count that would mean telling an untruth about the status of the tomb for the sake of a view of death Jews didn't accept.

My objections to Dr. Borg are not personal attacks on him. I would agree with many others that he is a kind, humorous and warm-hearted person. I find him likeable. But his message is dangerous—indeed, no less than fatal to the Christian Gospel. As I said to the other pastors in my own cluster, to the extent that people buy into his skepticism, the Church of Jesus Christ is dead.

Copies of this letter are also being sent to Dr. Borg, Bishop Maier, and every pastor of the Sno-King Cluster.

Sincerely,
Gary Jensen, Pastor

Marcus Borg wrote the following letter to me in response

1 December 1998

Dear Rev. Jensen,

Thank you for sending me a copy of the letter you sent to the clergy of the Sno-King Cluster. I appreciate the courtesy, and I value knowing what people think of my work.

Time compels a compact response. I hope it is nevertheless thoughtful. I will comment about two foundational points.

The first point concerns the resurrection. My claim is not that I know that there never was an empty tomb (though if I had to bet, I would bet that way). Rather, my claim is that the truth of Easter is not dependent upon the tomb being empty. As I see it, the truth of Easter is grounded in the fact that Jesus continues to be experienced as the living risen Christ to this day (and I think this is the position that Luke Johnson takes, to cite one of the scholars you mentioned in your letter).

The risen Christ has a “glorified body” – and how much continuity there is between a “glorified body” and the flesh and blood body, I have no idea. My point is that whether or not the tomb was empty is irrelevant to the truth of Easter. And so, a question I want to ask you (for your own thinking – no need to respond): “For you, what’s at stake in whether or not the tomb was empty?” Why is that such a crucial question that you’re willing to make it a litmus test for being a Christian?

[For more of my own understanding of the resurrection of Jesus, see pp. 129-137 and esp. footnote 14 on p. 268 of *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*, co-authored with Tom Wright and just published. You might also find interesting my treatment of the atonement (five understandings) on pp.137-142.]

The second point is perhaps even more foundational. Namely, it concerns two very different understandings of what it means to be Christian. The first is a “believing” understanding of Christianity; whatever more being a Christian means, it means “believing the right things” (for example, as revealed in Scripture and affirmed by the creeds). Your letter suggests that this is what you would emphasize. The second is a “relational” understanding of Christianity; that whatever more being Christian means, it means a relationship with God as known in Jesus Christ. Here the emphasis is not upon believing the tradition, but upon entering a deepening relationship with the one to whom (God, and God as known in Jesus) the Christian tradition points. By tradition, I mean Scripture, the creeds, confessional statements, and so forth.

In my work, I emphasize that tradition, in this comprehensive lens, is both a lens through which we see God, and a sacrament which mediates God to us. The point is not to believe in the lens or the sacrament, but to live within tradition as both lens and sacrament and let it do its work in us.

[For further development of a believing verses a relational understanding of what it means to be a Christian, see my *Meeting Jesus Again*, pp. 133-37; and *The Meaning of Jesus*, pp.238-250.

I appreciate this opportunity to respond to you.

With best wishes for an Advent of joyful anticipation.

Yours Truly
Marcus Borg

Cc: Jim Schoeld

Rev. Gary Jensen
St. Paul's of Shorewood Lutheran Church
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