

The Void and the Vision

The Void and the Vision

*A Thought-provoking Interpretation of the Gospel of Jesus
that Challenges Traditional Belief*

written by: **Carl Krieg**



The Void and the Vision

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Introduction

There are three parts to this little book. The first takes a new look at who Jesus was and what he did. The second describes four characteristics of human life. The third considers some of the perplexing questions of theology. Taken together, they represent an integrated attempt to understand our common humanity as children of God and are offered as a contribution to the on-going dialogue.

About the Author

Dr. Krieg received his B.A. from Dartmouth College, M.Div. from Union Theological Seminary in NYC, and Ph.D. from The University of Chicago Divinity School.

As professor and pastor, he has taught innumerable classes and led many discussion groups. His first book, *What to Believe? The Questions of Christian Faith* (Fortress Press) offered a critical survey of theological issues. This book, *The Void and the Vision*, represents 30 years of the author's struggling with those very same questions. He currently lives with his wife in Ridgway, Colorado.

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Some Preliminary Questions

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1♣ Is there only one answer to questions of faith?

Across the globe, many people are viciously intolerant. This seems particularly true when the issue is of a religious nature. Wholesale massacres, beheadings, and other atrocious acts arise out of an attitude that I am right and you are wrong, so therefore you are less than human and I can do whatever I want to you. And by the way, God is on my side. For this reason, if for no other, we must begin by asking ourselves: Is there only one answer to questions of faith?

Perhaps you have heard the story of the two blind men who were petting an elephant. One felt the ear in his hand, and when asked later what the elephant was like, he said it was big, flat and thin, like a pancake. The other man touched the trunk, and when asked to describe the elephant, he compared it to a snake.

Although we all like to believe that we are the most reasonable, open-minded, wonderful people walking the planet, the truth is that, like those two men, we are really quite blind to the whole picture. Our individual knowledge is very, very limited, and because it is so limited, we can never know the whole truth. Holding only an ear or trunk, we have no idea what the elephant is really like. Because of your life experience you are aware of certain truths of which I may be totally unaware, and vice versa, but nobody knows everything. As often as not, we misconstrue even that which we do experience.

One implication of this partial blindness from which we all suffer, is that we should listen very carefully to what others have to say, inasmuch as they have a vantage point that is different from our own, and we all have a great deal to learn. We should listen, speak humbly ourselves, and be tolerant of views that differ. It seems so obvious.

Tolerance, however, does not necessitate non-critical acceptance. There is a huge difference between being critical and being judgmental. Imagine yourself in a conversation. The other person says something with which you totally disagree. You could say, "You're totally wrong. Everybody knows...." You have judged the other person as mistaken, and further dialogue is useless. On the other hand, if each party listens to the other, considering the logic of the

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argument, the progression of thought, the hidden assumptions being made, and the validity of conclusions being drawn, i.e. if each party actually listens to the other, then both can learn something. In a true dialogue, where people actually pay attention to what the other is saying, everyone learns, and who knows, there might even be agreement. We all desperately need to be critical in our listening and talking, but not be self-righteously judgmental.

A second implication of the elephant metaphor, however, is that, even though we may be ignorant of the whole picture, we can speak with limited authority about what we do know or believe to be true. One man knew the ear, the other, the trunk. Just because we don't know everything does not mean that we don't know something. If I limit myself to speaking from my own experience—which, hopefully is always growing—then what I say will have some validity.

That is exactly what I plan to do in this book. I am a Christian trying to understand who Jesus was and what he did, and who we are and what gives meaning to our lives. I speak from this perspective and no other. I am not a Hindu, Buddhist, Jew, Muslim, or anything else. There certainly are truths that lie outside my frame of reference, truths of which I am unaware and truths that I must not judgmentally deny. My task here is very limited: namely, making sense out of the Jesus story as best we can, making sense out of our own story as human beings as best we can, and seeing how these two fit together. In doing so, there are least two levels of possible dialogue: one between Christians and non-Christians, the other between Christians who read the Jesus story in different ways. In each case we must remember our partial blindness.

It's not easy for some people to limit themselves in this way. They insist on having the whole truth and having it in such a way that it is applicable to everyone. There are those in the Christian tradition (as there are in all traditions) who claim to have the absolute truth, i.e. the truth that everyone must believe in order to be "saved." They go by various names: fundamentalists, evangelicals, conservatives, and are to be found in all church bodies. Their basic assertion is that the Bible is the absolute, inerrant, infallible, and literal word of God, dictated by the Holy Spirit to the various writers, word for word, comma for comma, period for period, and that you must believe it in order to be "saved."

This belief that the Bible is the inerrant word of God is a rather late concept in the history of Christian thought. The writers themselves did not speak of any

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divine intervention. Paul, who wrote many of the books of the New Testament, believed that he was just writing epistles to the various congregations he had founded. He had no thought of divine inspiration; he thought he was writing letters! In Catholicism, the church and its tradition were always viewed as a counterbalance to the scripture, the Bible therefore not being the only authority and certainly not the infallible word of God. Even Martin Luther, famous founder of the Protestant Reformation in 1519, whose battle cry was “sola scriptura” (by scripture alone) would have thrown the books of James and Revelation out of the New Testament, so little did he care for them. So much for biblical inerrancy in Luther’s mind! It was only in the so-called period of Protestant Orthodoxy immediately after the Reformation that the idea of biblical literalism took hold. Fundamentalism is a fairly recent phenomenon.

Not only is it without a long history in the Christian church, it is also judgmental without being critical. Every non-fundamentalist theology is rejected as “non-biblical,” and therefore wrong. Consequently, these people cannot enter real dialogue in critical fashion –be it with Christians or non-Christians—because their worldview is closed, the limits of their theology hidden from their own eyes.

Our approach shall be quite different. Excited by their encounter with Jesus, the disciples wanted to share their discovery with others. They told the story of God’s love present in Jesus. They spoke of the man they knew. They did not demand that others believe exactly as they did. Instead, they invited others to hear and to listen and to speak in return. And therein lays a valid approach. We too shall be inviting, not demanding, critical but not judgmental, seeking dialogue and hoping for mutual enlightenment.

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2♣ What do people think that Christians believe?

The common perception of what Christians believe goes something like this.

In the beginning, God created everything out of nothing. This God, usually thought of as a “he,” also created the first pair of humans, Adam and Eve, and placed them in a paradise called the Garden of Eden, where they were to live in eternal bliss. Unfortunately, in the guise of a serpent, the devil tempted Eve to eat of the fruit that God had forbidden. Giving in to the temptation, she ate, and having offered some to Adam, he also ate. Discovering their disobedience, God evicted them from Eden, condemning them and all their descendants to a life of toil, pain, and death.

As time went on, God developed a special relationship with the people of Israel, promising that from them would come forth a messiah, a savior who would redeem people from their sin. So it was that about 2000 years ago, as foretold in the Hebrew bible, God emptied Himself and became flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the promised messiah, born of the virgin Mary. At about age 30 Jesus began a public ministry, preaching about the arrival of the Kingdom of God, performing miracles, and calling disciples who were to become his church.

Jesus provoked both the Jewish and Roman authorities and, after a triumphal entry into Jerusalem for a Passover feast on a day we now call Palm Sunday, Jesus was apprehended, beaten, and crucified. However, this was all part of God’s plan, and death was not the final word. In three days, Jesus rose from the dead, as evidenced both by stories of an empty tomb as well as appearances to his disciples. After forty days, Jesus ascended into heaven, to sit on the right hand of God the Father, from which position he will return in the future to judge all mankind. In the meanwhile, the Holy Spirit came into the church on a day we call Pentecost, and this church was thereby empowered to preach the good news about Jesus. What was this good news? What was it that God had done in Jesus? Quite simply, it is thought, Christians believe that Jesus died on the cross for their sins, and that somehow his suffering and death

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was a sacrifice to God, so that now all sins are forgiven for those who in faith accept Jesus as their savior and are members of his church.

There are variations to the themes, of course, but this pretty well summarizes the popular perception of basic Christian belief. A few comments are in order. First of all, just because people believe something does not make it so. Just because a majority of Christians might believe the above summary of their doctrine does not necessitate that that is in fact what happened. There is no guarantee that truth lies in numbers.

Secondly, the fact that the Christian church includes a great variety of seemingly disparate groups might cause one to wonder if they should all go by the same name. Catholic papists and Appalachian snake charmers, all under one roof? Progressive Congregationalists and fundamentalist Southern Baptists? Most of us forget that in the early days of the Christian religion, there was no commonly accepted orthodoxy. The summary given above was non-existent. Instead of there being one common church, there were many opinions about almost every topic, and it was only through debate and, yes, fights, that anything approaching an orthodoxy emerged. Uniformity in belief was given a big boost when Constantine became Emperor and decided that squabbling amongst the bishops was not conducive to stability in the empire. There were many heretics left by the wayside, the only reason for their supposed heresy being that they lost the battle, be it a battle of word or of sword. I repeat: during the early days of the Christian church, there was no orthodoxy, no traditional belief, no commonly accepted set of beliefs. The traditional doctrine is something that emerged only over time.

With close examination, this disparity can be found even in the New Testament itself. The various books present different points of view, not all of which are reconcilable. Mark and Luke and Matthew and John and Paul each had their own perspective on things, writing in different places and for different reasons. As a consequence, there is no common Christian dogma to be found even in the Bible itself. Furthermore, the Bible itself might have been different. The only reason the New Testament contains what it does, is because those books in particular were accepted by the gathered bishops as being reliable. Had there been a different group of bishops making the decision, the results might have been different. They might have left out some books that were included, or they might have included some books that were omitted. Some scholars

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today believe that parts of the excluded writings contain genuine sayings of Jesus, and really should be part of the scripture.

All of this means, thirdly, that although we must respect tradition, we must not allow bondage to tradition to stifle our creativity today. The summary given above is not the only option, and never has been. Each person must “make sense” of the Jesus story for herself. Failing to do so would prevent the story from becoming part of a living faith. I say what I say in the following pages because it makes sense to me.

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3♣ How do we know anything about Jesus?

Although Jesus is mentioned in some secular histories, practically everything we know about him came from the reports of those early disciples—from Peter and Andrew, Mary Magdalene, Matthew, and all the rest. These reports are found in the four books of the New Testament that we call the “gospels,” plus some other reports that are not included in the Bible. Since these books are our primary sources, it is incumbent upon us to know how they came to be.

It seems clear that Jesus was born about 2000 years ago. Probably a carpenter’s son, his early life was one of relative obscurity. Then, at about age thirty, Jesus began an activity that caused him to become the most famous public figure of all time. He was an itinerant preacher, traveling from place to place, gathering disciples, criticizing the establishment, and generally creating quite a stir. The disciples recognized in him something so very special that their lives were forever changed. To the best of their ability, they remembered what Jesus said, what he did, and how people responded. Eager that others might share in this new life, they told the story of Jesus.

There were fragments at first, just bits and pieces, inasmuch as no one knew everything. As time progressed, the fragments coalesced into ever-growing compilations. Some remembered more accurately than others, and some embellished the stories, making them “better” than they actually were. The “information,” therefore, is not always accurate.

The form of the telling also changed, from oral report based on memory to new written forms. Times were changing. As eyewitnesses to events were dying and disappearing, preservation of the original material was best accomplished using papyrus and vellum. Not only that, but the small group of disciples had become transformed into an organization. This institution wanted documents—to teach converts, to maintain unity in face of multiple “heresies,” and to defend their beliefs against false charges from the government.

The stories more easily coalesced in the big cities, where missionaries and travelers gathered to share information. Population centers such as Jerusalem,

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Rome, and Antioch accelerated the publication process. As one might expect, each city had its own version of the Jesus story, some containing material they shared in common with others, some containing material peculiar to that metropolis.

The many teachings and stories of Jesus were not compiled haphazardly. The versions of the gospels that we have today are the work of editors piecing the vignettes together in order to provide their particular congregation with a comprehensive Jesus narrative. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, whoever they were, if they were individuals at all, gathered and edited the material in unique fashion, preparing a document that would be helpful in the life of their congregation. We find, therefore, in the various gospels a deliberate attempt to present the story in such a way as to accomplish a particular purpose. Matthew writes for a Jewish community, “proving” Jesus to be the promised Hebrew messiah, while Luke offers us a Jesus who is compassionate, sent from God to bring happiness and wholeness to all people, including Romans.

Evolution of the gospels was a long, involved process. They grew layer upon layer, the later church embellishing the old documents and adding new material. Mark, the earliest of the gospels, was put in its final form about 35 years after the crucifixion. The others date well toward the end of the first century, about 60 years after Jesus died. Clearly, there was a long stretch of time between the actual events surrounding Jesus and when the last of the gospels took final form.

As you might imagine, there were many groups that wrote their own Jesus story. They claimed to have verbatim words that he spoke and also claimed to describe actual events in his life. The church of the first and second centuries had the unenviable task of deciding fact from fiction. Deciding this question, the church gathered in council and made decisions relative to the accuracy of the various gospels. Those approved as valid included Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and these were included in the canon, the accepted normative writings, also known as the New Testament. Others were excluded from that canon, but were included in a volume known as the apocrypha. A few New Testament scholars believe that some apocryphal gospels contain material that is equally as valid as the New Testament gospels. In a way, the final and definitive version of the Jesus story has yet to be told. Furthermore, the story that we do have was “pre-edited” by the early church “fathers” who were male, celibate, and representative of an organizational hierarchy. This does not mean

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that the New Testament gospels are totally unreliable, only that we must acknowledge how they came to be, and treat them accordingly.

As we have seen, the fundamentalists believe that the gospels are the inerrant, inspired, and infallible word of God, and must be accepted word for word, comma for comma. I would certainly agree that the early disciples who remembered and later told the story of Jesus were inspired, but not in the manner of dumb robots writing down divine dictation. They were people just like you and me, struggling with the problems of life, but also convinced that a new life was possible because of Jesus. The gospels were written in faith for the presentation of that faith, and that's how we must relate to them today. They must not be accepted as literally true. They were never intended to be taken that way.

That, of course, means we have a problem. Once we realize that the story of Jesus presented in the gospel is faithful but also fallible, we must fully admit that we can never be assured that our picture of Jesus is accurate. The greatest danger is that we create a picture based more on our imagination than on historical sources. I must fully confess that what follows is my portrait of the man from Nazareth. I hope it reflects reality, but there is no guarantee. It makes good sense to me, and I offer it for your consideration. Perhaps the day will come when incontrovertible evidence will offer to us an indisputable life of Jesus. Until then, our portrait must be tentative.

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4♣ Where did the rest of the Bible come from?

We speak of the “Bible” as though it were a single book, which it most certainly is not. In addition to the fact that it is divided into two major “testaments,” the old (the Hebrew scripture) and the new, each of those parts resulted from the gathering together of many writings, ranging over centuries, if not millennia.

The New Testament, containing, as we have seen, the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, has many other “books.” Acts is really the second half of Luke’s gospel, and it is also the longest book in the New Testament. Much of the New Testament content is comprised of letters written by Paul of Tarsus, sent to the small congregations that he founded during his missionary travels, and in which he deals with various problems confronting the struggling communities. The book of Revelation, mistakenly thought by fundamentalists to describe the end of time, was actually a word of encouragement written in code that sought to help new believers keep the faith even in the face of persecution. And so it goes. The New Testament, far from being a unitary and coherent publication, is actually a collection of thoughts from many hands, written over a span of more than half a century.

The Old Testament is even more diverse. The oldest literary strata come from perhaps 900 B.C.E., the latest originating in the period of the Jewish state before the birth of Jesus. The variety of material is amazing. On the one hand, primitive mythology speaks of a God who leads armies into combat, who commands the sacrifice of animals, who walks in the cool of the day in the garden of Eden. On the other hand the later prophets describe a God who demands not sacrifice but righteousness, a God who causes His light to shine upon all nations, leading them to beat swords into plowshares. There is poetry, music, mythology, stinging political commentary, a love song, legal codes—all spread out over hundreds of years and originating in different places.

No, the Bible is definitely not a single book. As a compilation of many sources, it incorporates a great variety of concepts, some of which contradict each other. There is much truth to the charge that you can find anything you

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want in the Bible. It just depends on where you look. Anyone who recites biblical quotes as answers to questions doesn't really know the Bible.

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5♣ Is the Bible the Word of God?

The answer is both yes and no. If we think of the Bible as a document that some God or gods dropped out of heaven, then the answer to our question is: “No, the Bible is not a word from God.” It’s not as though God commanded the 100 or so “writers” of the Bible, “Sit down and take dictation. What you hear now is the absolute, inerrant, infallible, unchangeable Word of God.” It is not Yahweh using his index finger to inscribe Ten Commandments on tablets of stone held by Moses on Mt. Sinai, regardless of what Charlton Heston would have us believe.

If it did not come from God, then where did it come from? The first point to remember is that there is no “it.” The Bible is a compilation of many sources, and, instead of asking whether or not the Bible is the Word of God, we should ask, for example, is the gospel of Luke the Word of God? We have seen in a previous chapter how the gospel came to be. Jesus changed peoples’ lives. Some of them remembered what he said, what he did, and how persons responded. Some of these remembrances were written down, gathered into collections, and finally edited by someone who was creating a document for use by a particular group of believers.

At each stage in this developmental process, the persons involved believed that they had been encountered by God. What they were trying to communicate was both a statement of faith and a report about what they believed actually happened. They were writing about events from a faith perspective. Their intent was to preserve the memory of Jesus so that they could be strengthened in their faith as well as enable and empower them to witness to others, and this was accomplished by reporting events as interpreted through the eyes of faith.

There are two ways we can read and react to the gospel. If you are a historian, you seek to separate fact from interpretation. Looking for the objective truth, the scholar arrives at conclusions about who the writer was, when she wrote, how good her memory was, and so on. This is work that must be done; we need to know all we can about Luke and all the rest of the biblical books, so that we do not impose our worldview onto them.

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But even as you gather all the scholarly evidence and try your best to understand what Luke was all about, something else can happen. If you read and it causes within you some kind of connection to the faith expressed therein, then for you Luke can become the Word of God. If there is an inner appreciation of and identification with the faith of those writers, then something other than purely historical investigation has happened. You have experienced what you can rightfully call the Word of God.

Other books of the Bible may not create that connection for you, and so they are not the Word as far as you are concerned. I have mentioned earlier how Martin Luther would have taken the books of James and Revelation and thrown them both out of the New Testament. It may be the case that it's not the whole of what Luke says that makes faith sense to you, but only a particular story, or parable, or even just a saying of Jesus. Whatever it is, if your life has been changed and if you attribute that change to divine enlightenment, then those words have functioned like God's Word for you. And that is basically how the books of the New Testament got there in the first place. The church got together and agreed that these certain writings had functioned for them as the Word of God and should therefore be included in the canon, the Holy Scripture, the norm for their faith. The worldwide church as a whole, therefore, can accept the collected books of the Bible as a whole, and agree that these books will be accepted as faith statements, but this does not necessitate that every person in the church accept all the books equally.

In theory, the canon is still open. That is to say, if the church as a whole could agree that some new or newly discovered writing made that faith connection for them and functioned as the Word of God, then that writing would become part of the scripture. From a practical point of view, however, such agreement is impossible, and the canon, basically, is closed.

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Part One



Jesus and the Early Church

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6♣ The Disciples

Why did the disciples follow Jesus?

The only reason we have a story about Jesus—and therefore a New Testament and Christianity—the only reason is because some people were so impacted by him that they were later willing to die for his name. Consider the images we have: Levi, a tax collector, is sitting at his station on the roadway. Jesus approaches, says “Follow me,” and Levi leaves his work and follows. Simon and Andrew are fishing. Jesus arrives, says “Come with me,” and they leave their nets and follow. Whether or not these events are literally true is of no consequence: they represent the disciples’ perception of the event. In their mind, it was as simple as “Follow me” and they went.

They didn’t follow because Jesus flew around treetops or did magic tricks or because he was a good example. They followed because...How shall we describe it?? To say that “Something very special happened” seems trite in the extreme. But it’s true: it was a unique event in their life that had no equivalent. Later on, we’ll develop some concepts we can use to explain their encounter. For now, let’s just concentrate on the description that the disciples themselves offer. What do they say happened when they met Jesus?

On the one hand, they experienced God in and through him in a way that was unique in their lives. They had become new persons, and they believed that God alone had the power to enable them to make that kind of change.

On the other hand, they discovered in Jesus what it meant to be truly human. They found in him one who was without sin, without guile, without any of the distortions of humanity that work against love. He was a truly human, loving being.

The loving and enabling power of God that changed their lives did not come from thunder and lightning, nor from a voice in the sky, nor from miraculous intervention in the course of nature. No. It came from, in, and through—what preposition is adequate?—the flesh, bones, mind and spirit of the compassionate and loving person named Jesus of Nazareth. The presence of God and the loving humanity of Jesus, combined, led the disciples into newness of life.

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We must particularly realize that the loving humanity in Jesus was not alien to the disciples. It was not something from another planet or some other level of being. Jesus was like a mirror. When the disciples looked at Jesus in that moment of truth, they saw an image of who they really were and, with the help of God, could become. They saw in him the kind of person they were created to be, and they knew that if they followed and emulated this man they would discover happiness and fulfillment—because they would have rediscovered themselves! No, the love embodied in Jesus was not alien to the disciples at all. It was who they were.

So Levi and Andrew and Peter did not follow Jesus because he performed miracles, or because he was a great teacher, or because he was a good example. The encounter was much more powerful than that. They followed because in the moment of encounter with Jesus they recognized in him who they could become with the help of God. And the essence of who they could become was love. In Jesus the disciples learned that God loved them and that they were to love one another, indeed, love all people. It's that simple. Jesus was the incarnation of love, and through his life and words the disciples realized who they really were, namely, persons of love.

How did the disciples relate to one another?

As the individual disciples followed Jesus, they found they were not alone. Jesus did not call them to be solitary disciples, but rather to become formative members of a community that would work with him both while he was alive and after he died. The word “community” is used so loosely today as to become meaningless. We have the community of used car dealers, the community of eastern potato farmers, etc. The community of disciples was much more like a family. The following scenario, as presented in the gospels, illustrates this rather clearly.

Jesus had gathered his disciples and was wandering about the countryside preaching about the Kingdom of God. As we shall soon see, the irreverent freedom and joyfulness of the little band, quite like that depicted in the musical *Godspell*, irritated and upset both the religious and political authorities. Their lifestyle also upset Mary, the mother of Jesus. The usual image of the “Virgin Mother” is that of a sweet woman who always knew in her heart that her baby was the savior of the world. The following story (Mark 3:31 ff.) indicates otherwise.

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Jesus is with his disciples as well as some others. Standing off to the side are Mary and Jesus' brothers, who by now are convinced that Jesus was crazy. Perhaps embarrassed by and for Jesus, they send a messenger to inform him that his mother and brothers would like to speak with him. Jesus responds by asking, "And who are my mother and my brothers?" Answering his own question, he points to his disciples and says, "You are my mother and my brothers, and those who do the will of God."

"Who is my family?" Jesus asks. "You, my disciples," is his answer.

The Greek word, *koinonia* (koy no nee' a), is used to describe a community that is spiritual, and inasmuch as Jesus referred to his band as both "family" and as "friends" (see gospel of John), it is appropriate to say that Jesus gathered about himself a *koinonia* family of friends.

But why? Why gather a *koinonia* family of friends? Was it because other Jewish rabbis had disciples? Was it just to have some folks to carry on his teaching after he was gone? Was it to initiate and organize a larger institution? Or is it not rather the case that in gathering this new family Jesus is telling us that this is where and how one finds fulfillment in life? that in sharing life with other such spiritual persons we find our greatest joy? Jesus did not rest content with creating a series of one-on-one relationships with his disciples. He also helped them create bonds of love with one another. As a result, when he died the community did not disintegrate. Perhaps the central tenet of Jesus' teaching is that the Kingdom of God is in our midst. The *koinonia* family of friends created by Jesus was a microcosm of that very kingdom, a "little place" wherein mutual caring and sharing made manifest the love that ultimately guides the universe.

Were there women disciples?

The common impression is that Jesus had twelve disciples, all men. Further, they are believed to have been very devout and respectable, later becoming the apostolic pillars of the Church. This impression is mistaken. Attention to details presents quite a different picture, especially with respect to the role of women, the forgotten females.

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Jesus apparently had many followers, often referred to as “disciples.” Some of them returned home when Jesus demanded too much, but others, some 70 in number, were sent out, two by two, to spread the word. In addition to this larger number, there was the smaller and more intimate group, whom we have referred to as Jesus’ family of friends. It is true that a cursory reading of the New Testament gives one the impression that this group was comprised of twelve men. Closer reading, however, reveals some interesting suggestions.

Mark and Matthew give us the names of twelve “apostles.” The gospel of Luke has a list as well, but it is not the same (Judas the son of James, rather than Thaddeus). The gospel of John alone mentions someone called Nathaniel. These disparities alone call in question the assumption that there were twelve.

Furthermore, there are many references to women as part of the group.

From Luke:

“Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, preaching and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod’s steward, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means.” (8:1-3)

Later, at the crucifixion at Golgotha, Luke adds:

“And all his acquaintances and the women who had followed from Galilee stood at a distance and saw these things.” (23:49)

These same women see where he is laid in the tomb and return “on the first day of the week,” only to find Jesus “risen,” and then rush back to tell the others.

“Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told this to the apostles, but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.” (24:10-12)

Despite the fact that Luke refers to the apostles and the women as two separate entities, we must remember that he wrote about 60 years after the facts he describes, time during which the notion of a “twelve,” symbolic of the twelve tribes of Israel, had achieved unimpeachable status.

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The same references to women are found in Matthew and Mark. At the crucifixion:

“There were also many women there, looking on from afar, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him; among them were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.” (Matt 27:55-56)

“There were also women looking on from afar, among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger, and Salome, who, when he was in Galilee, followed him, and ministered to him; and also many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem.” (Mark 15:40-41)

Matthew and Mark also tell us, as did Luke, that it was some of the women who first reported “he is risen.” The gospel of John has Jesus’ mother, his aunt Mary, the wife of Clopus, and Mary Magdalene “standing by the cross.” John also has Magdalene, alone, going to the tomb on the first day of the week to prepare the body. Further, Magdalene is the first to whom Jesus appears after the resurrection, and Jesus must tell her not to “cling” to him. Clearly, Mary Magdalene plays a most prominent role, at least in the mind of John, and has a very close relationship with Jesus.

So where does all this leave us? According to the sources, we have the names of some women who were very close to Jesus and the men: Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, Salome, two other Marys, and Zebedee’s wife, as well as “the others.” These women ministered to Jesus. They provided for the whole group “out of their means.” They traveled with Jesus. They are the first to become aware of the resurrection. They knew where the “upper room” was, where Jesus celebrated the last supper with his disciples before he was arrested, and we must assume that they were there for that meal. On all counts, women played a significant, if not dominant, role, in Jesus’ koinonia family of friends.

It seems, then, that there were 20-30 disciples in this intimate group. They included men, at least 12 or 13 by name, and women, seven by name, and “the others.” The women financed the group “out of their means,” as well as having ministered to Jesus. Two of the men, the sons of Zebedee, had their mother as a co-disciple. Jesus and Magdalene seem to be particularly close. And the

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crucifixion-resurrection narratives indicate that the faith of the women exceeded that of the men. Certainly it is due only to the dominant male influence in both the first century church as well as later that we lack more information about the women. When we think of Jesus and his disciples, we must see both women and men.

What were the disciples like?

We mentioned at the beginning of the previous chapter that the common impression of the disciples is that they were the rock solid pillars of the new movement. As before, however, closer investigation leads to a different conclusion.

The gospels present the disciples from a twofold perspective. On the one hand, they are faithful followers who have left everything and committed their lives to Jesus. On the other hand, they are also portrayed as weak, fearful, and at times, just plain stupid.

Beginning with the first, the fact is that these people left whatever they had in life and followed Jesus. Try to even imagine doing that yourself, and you begin to realize the enormity of their commitment. To be sure, they never traveled more than perhaps ninety miles from home, and could easily have checked in on occasion. Nevertheless, for a period of about three years, they were itinerant preachers, moving on from village to village. Some disciples left their boats and nets; Matthew left his office of tax collector. The rest we just don't know about. But it is absolutely clear that for each and every one of them, the encounter with Jesus profoundly altered their lives and entailed a certain amount of risk. As far as Jesus himself was concerned, these women and men were both friends and family. If not perfect, they had been able to perceive in him a presence of God not obvious to all, and they had dedicated their lives to the service of this man and his message.

But apparently there was a weak side, and in chapter nine of his gospel Luke points graphically to some of the disciples' shortcomings. A man begs the disciples to heal his son, but they could not, the implication being that their faith was inadequate. Jesus tells them that he is soon to be "delivered," but they do not understand the reference to his death and are afraid to ask. They did not see where the path led. Then a childish dispute arises among them about who is the greatest. Jesus' response is to point to a child and admonish:

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“Whoever is least will be greatest.” We are then told that they were jealous of other healers who were not part of their little group, but Jesus tries to open their minds to see that God can do good through other people as well. When a Samaritan village refuses to host Jesus and his band, the disciples want to bid fire come down from heaven and consume it. All Luke says is: “But Jesus turned and rebuked them.” The mother of the sons of Zebedee (or the boys themselves, depending on which version one reads) wants a guarantee that in heaven her sons will sit at the right hand of Jesus’ throne.

Jesus must have been disheartened by these displays of spiritual poverty. It is difficult for us to imagine that the disciples could have been so petty and shallow in the presence of Jesus. It is possible that these events never occurred. Even so, the fact that they are included in the record indicates that the weakness of the disciples was an accepted element of the story as handed down.

Up to and including the hour of crucifixion, the disciples still did not comprehend the nature of Jesus’ mission. When the master is apprehended and taken into custody, the disciples run away and hide in the shadows, fearful lest they also be arrested and executed. Peter, who had proudly and vigorously affirmed that he would never desert his master, denies three times to interrogators that he ever knew Jesus, even as Jesus is being dragged away. A moment later, when Peter realized the depth of his betrayal, he “went out and wept bitterly.” The disciples were not perfect.

From the perspective of the Jewish elders, the life of Jesus and his followers was irreligious, immoral, and improper. In fact, Luke tells us that when those guardians of the established social mores brought Jesus before Pilate, he was accused of “perverting our nation.” Why? What did he do?

To begin with, Jesus and his disciples continuously broke the Jewish moral and religious law. The law forbade any type of work on the Sabbath, and in direct violation of the law as interpreted by the Pharisees, Jesus healed on the Sabbath on many occasions, healing being considered work. It was also unlawful to pick grain on the Sabbath—so what do Jesus and the disciples do but exactly that! They also rejected the old laws of purification whereby certain procedures had to be followed before eating. And they did not fast and offer prayers as did the Pharisees and the disciples of John the Baptist.

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Not only did they break the law, but they seemed to take great pleasure in their liberated behavior. Not only do they not fast and offer prayer, but—quite the opposite—they “eat and drink” (Luke 5:33). Jesus rebukes his critics: “John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine; and you say ‘He has a demon!’ The son of man has come eating and drinking and you say ‘Behold a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’” (Luke 7:33-34) Given the choice, Jesus did in fact choose to eat with prostitutes and other “sinners.”

But perhaps the greatest scandal of all was just the way the disciples and Jesus lived and traveled. They had left their homes, families and job security, choosing instead to be vagabonds. In the culture of first century Palestine, to leave one’s social network and become an outsider was a tremendously bold step and, for women in particular, could be quite dangerous. The life they had chosen was definitely beyond the pale of accepted and respectable behavior. Men and women, living together as family and friends for three years. Where did they sleep and eat? Did they beg, or were they totally supported by “the other women”? Even if we imagine the most “respectable” arrangement, it still wasn’t respectable enough. The new life shared by Jesus and his disciples was new wine that would burst asunder the old skin of moralistic purism, and that was certainly why Jesus was ultimately nailed to the cross.