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Recommended Citation

Johnsson, William G., "What Jesus a Revolutionary?" (1977). *Faculty Publications*. 4065.
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Was Jesus a Revolutionary?

Three facts of His ministry lead to a surprising conclusion.

By William G. Johnsson

The rubric "freedom" gathers an odd assortment of bedfellows. What is most surprising about this motley crowd is that so many of its number make appeal to Jesus Christ.

On the Far Left, people throw bombs—and claim support from Jesus Christ. To them He was the ideal of the revolutionary—One who set out to topple social institutions of His day and who died in the attempt. It was a German pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who joined the abortive bomb plot on the life of Adolf Hitler. Liberation movements in Rhodesia, like the civil-rights crusade in the U.S., are led by ministers whose motivation is an aroused *Christian* conscience.

Yet Jesus is also used to buttress the status quo. Some of the most vehement advocates of "America—Love It or Leave It" and "Shape Up or Ship Out" are to be found in the Bible Belt. The "freedom" of Jesus is the freedom of society as it is constituted *now*; the appeal to Jesus as a revolutionary is blasphemous.

Then there is a third major group. They look to Jesus as a strictly *individual* example. In His name they turn their backs on "the world." At its purest, this tendency leads ultimately to the monastery. It is espoused in modified forms by many devout Christians, however. Jesus offers freedom from sin—which comes across as separation from worldly structures. Thus, Jesus was essentially a "loner" in His society, and so will His followers be today. Or, put less graciously, the way of Christ is a "copout."

Something obviously is wrong here. Jesus cannot legitimize both the bomb-throwers and the status quo. He cannot support indiscriminate sex and faithfulness to but one partner in marriage—let alone celi-

bacy! He cannot be the champion of social reformers and also the example for those who "cop out" from social concerns. Jesus may be Mr. Freedom, but freedom to do what?

The theologians do not remove the dilemma. They too are divided in their interpretations of Jesus. Nineteenth-century theology was preoccupied with this task: to recover the real Jesus, the historical Jesus. Hundreds of biographies of Jesus were written in German, French, and English. But, as Dr. Albert Schweitzer showed in *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, all failed. Every writer interpreted Jesus according to his own lights; the Jesus who emerged was a reflection of nineteenth-century ideals.

Schweitzer himself set out a radically new portrait. His Jesus was an apocalyptic visionary. One who thought that His preaching would bring in the kingdom and who at last threw Himself on the wheel of fate to accomplish that task when His preaching failed. More recently, however, S. G. F. Brandon, in *Jesus and the Zealots*, argued that Jesus was connected with the political hotheads of Jerusalem—the radical fringe who eventually led the revolt against Rome. The majority of modern Biblical scholars, on the other hand, have given up the attempt to paint a portrait of the actual Jesus. They remain skeptical that the historical Jesus can be recovered from the mists of antiquity, and they doubt that He would be relevant to twentieth-century thought and conduct even if He could.

Have we reached an impasse? Is every advocate of a new type of liberation to bandy about the name of Jesus at will?

Not at all. Granted that there are formidable problems in interpreting Jesus; yet the task is not hopeless.

We know more about Him than almost any other figure of antiquity. If many details of His life and teachings remain obscure, the contours may be sketched, as Dr. L. E. Keck has now shown in *A Future for the Historical Jesus*. Those contours indicate three facts that bear directly on the question of Jesus and freedom.

Jesus Was a Liberator

Matthew 4, verses 23 and 24, provides a fair summary of the mission of Jesus as it is developed in all four Gospel accounts:

Jesus traveled all through Galilee teaching in the Jewish synagogues, everywhere preaching the Good News about the Kingdom of Heaven. And he healed every kind of sickness and disease. The report of his miracles spread far beyond the borders of Galilee so that sick folk were soon coming to be healed from as far away as Syria. And whatever their illness and pain, or if they were possessed by demons, or were insane, or paralyzed—he healed them all (T.L.B.).*

It is indisputable that Jesus spent much of His public ministry in acts of healing. Many of those acts were exorcisms. The backdrop to the healings and exorcisms is a conflict: man is bound, a victim of disease or demons, and Jesus comes to loose him (e.g., Luke 13:10-16). Or the analogy changes: man is groping in darkness, and Jesus comes to shed light upon his way (Matt. 4:15, 16).

In the Gospel of Luke the language of liberation is especially clear-cut. Here the ministry of Jesus commences with the sermon at

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Nazareth, with its programmatic quotation from Isaiah:

“The spirit of the Lord is upon me; he has appointed me to preach Good News to the poor: he has sent me to heal the brokenhearted and to announce that captives shall be released and the blind shall see, that the downtrodden shall be freed from their oppressors, and that God is ready to give blessings to all who come to him” (Luke 4:18, 19, T.L.B.).

Gordon Yoder, in his recent book entitled *The Politics of Jesus*, suggests that Jesus here announces His mission in terms of the Old Testament jubilee—the year of release. Whether or not Yoder is correct, it is clear that, for Luke, Jesus is the Friend and Helper of social outcasts. Throughout the Gospel we find Jesus fraternizing with fringe groups—“publicans and sinners,” Gentiles, the poor, and women.

In the fourth Gospel the liberation of Jesus is couched in terms of ignorance-knowledge. Man is a slave to sin, but is unaware of it. Jesus comes with the truth that sets men free: “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. . . . If the Son sets you free, you will indeed be

* From *The Living Bible, Paraphrased* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1971). Used by permission.

free.” “My purpose is to give life in all its fullness” (John 8:32-36; 10:10, T.L.B.).

It is plain, therefore, that the modern emphasis on Jesus as liberator is not without foundation in the historical Jesus. Jesus Christ was Mr. Freedom par excellence!

But we have still to spell out the *content* of the freedom that Jesus offered. This leads us to the second significant fact.

Jesus Was Executed

Christian parlance commonly refers to the “death” of Jesus, or His “sacrifice.” The historical datum is, however, this: He was executed. After a trial He was put to death publicly between two felons.

No aspect of the story of Jesus Christ is more sure than this. Certainly the critic has never suggested that the Crucifixion was an invention of His followers! The cross in the ancient world was a repugnant symbol: it stood for ignominy and suffering, a public display of the fate of those who would oppose the iron clasp of Roman rule.

Yet this fact—the *execution* of Jesus—is surely the central datum in any discussion of Jesus and freedom. Clearly, Jesus was not an innocuous character: a milksop Jesus

ILLUSTRATED BY JILL TRIVER

would never have come to grief on a Roman cross!

Jesus, in fact, in spite of His humility, must have been a *threat* to vested interests in His society. What He stood for was inimical to the hierarchy, and eventually the only way out was to have Him removed. Whether we wish to pin the blame on the Jewish or the Roman authorities is beside the point: the execution of Jesus points inexorably to the *challenge* He presented to the society of His day.

In fact, the Gospels—all four of them—depict a Jesus in controversy throughout His ministry. He disputes with the religious leaders over the manner of Sabbath observance, He freely interprets the laws of Moses (“You have heard . . . it . . . said . . . but I tell you”), He clashes with Herod. His denunciation of the religious hierarchy is scathing: “Hypocrites . . . whited sepulchres . . . blind guides.” Indeed, the cross at the end of the story is not at all a surprise—it has become inevitable to the discerning reader. This is the condemnation, that men love darkness rather than light; when the light comes into the world their response can only be: Put out the light!

The fact of the execution of Jesus should give pause to those Christians who have chosen the “copout” road in social questions. Jesus was no copout!

Likewise, it should cause serious misgivings among those who seek to legitimize the status quo in His name. It was the Establishment that erected the cross. Who will dare to say that the Establishment has been Christianized?

Does then Jesus take His place among the radicals of the New Left? Is social involvement the new evangelism? We turn to the third fact before us.

Jesus Renounced Force

This fact is less palatable to the modern advocates of liberation. They would like to stop the discussion at the execution, with Jesus, the One who works and preaches freedom, suffering a martyr’s death at the hands of conservative political forces. Then He is merely a pawn among the power brokers of social institutions.

But history will not allow this easy resolution of the enigma of Jesus. It is not by chance that the cross became the symbol of the new religion derived from Him. It is not by chance that the essence of early Christian preaching was the story of a *crucified* Messiah—foolishness to the Greeks, a scandal to the Jews. It is not by chance that the language of personal Christian living employs the terminology of “death” and “crucifixion,” especially in the writings of Paul. For Christianity is more than the story of a good Man who *died* on a cross (and rose again)—it is witness to a *life* lived, which culminated in a death on a Roman cross. In other words, the mission of Jesus was the cross-life and cross-death.

Jesus was a revolutionary—but not in the manner that anarchists would like. The zealot option was open to him, but it seems clear that He deliberately turned from it. Instead of the appeal to arms to change society, He took up a weapon so radical that no society has ever been bold enough to adopt it—the cross. The cross is individually and socially transforming. It stands for voluntary subordination, for the self-conscious renunciation of force.

“If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me,” says Jesus (Matt. 16:24, T.L.B.). In

the famous Sermon on the Mount He describes the characteristics of the citizens of His kingdom: the poor in spirit, the humble, the merciful, the peacemakers, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the persecuted, the pure in heart. They do not resist evil with evil; they do not discriminate in their love; thus, their lives mirror the acts of the Father in heaven.

This is the paradox of the freedom of Jesus. It is freedom through *death*, freedom through an utter change, a transformation. In the fourth Gospel it comes across like this: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of Spirit is spirit. . . . Ye must be born again” (John 3:6, 7).

And so—it is freedom to *love*. It is freedom to look upon man as *man*, to see in every human being—the butcher, the baker, the candlestick-maker; red, yellow, black, and white—a son of God. It is freedom from prejudice, from hatred, from discrimination.

Freedom through love—it is still a lively option. Gandhi demonstrated its potency as a social lever. But the man who probably understands it best today is Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. He learned the meaning of freedom—in a prison cell! It was when he had lost everything that he became free. So his writings are marked by an incredible lack of bitterness toward those who most misused him.

Jesus was Mr. Freedom. He found in Himself that liberation of spirit that comes from the cross. He lived to lead others to that same freedom.

And He is Mr. Freedom. Bombers and free lovers, anarchists and the gay people may claim His support, but they fail at the crucial point. They are *not radical enough*. It is the cross alone that sets men free. □