



An Agenda for Change
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WILL THE REAL JESUS STEP FORWARD?

When Martin Scorsese's film *The Last Temptation of Christ* came to our screens, most of us missed the point. The outcries of blasphemy we sent up were all reactions to the scenes of Jesus abandoning the cross, having sex with Mary Magdalene and settling down to family life. But if Jesus really was fully human, as we believe, then those were reasonable temptations he would have wrestled with. If there was any blasphemy it had a lot more to do with the scenes depicting him as a disorientated miracle worker with an identity crisis.

For if there was one thing Jesus was clear about it was who he was. By the tender age of twelve he was already consumed with his Father's business.¹ Over and above his miracles and teachings, Jesus was passionate about his identity. Nothing mattered more to him than the intimate awareness of who he was and the unique mission which flowed from this.

When he did a brief public opinion survey in the gospels, it was in the shadow of Caesarea Philippi where Greek mythology, Roman religion and Hebrew legends met. And so his question about his identity really was a hard one to answer. But it was designed to provoke Peter's outburst declaring him to be God's Messiah.² The disciple's remark was an echo of

what John the baptiser had said some time before,³ what God himself confirmed⁴ and what the apostles would go on to say again and again.⁵

But while Jesus may have been clear about who he was, his followers ever since have generally had more problems. Because apart from God, who can fully know Christ? Within a short period after Peter's great confession it was evident that even he himself had failed to grasp precisely what it meant for Jesus to be the Messiah.⁶ And if Peter couldn't fathom his own statement, we should not be surprised that everybody else has struggled to understand it since. In the earliest letters of the Christian church, Paul – the most prolific of the Bible writers – devoted more material than any of his contemporaries trying to help us understand just who this Jesus is.⁷

From its inception the Christian church has stumbled through heresies, factions and councils to describe how it was possible for one person to be truly God and truly man: frail but not fallen. The church had to wrestle its way towards orthodoxy with what we now know as the Apostles' Creed, and, like Peter's confession, the words did not come easily.

But a knowledge of the real Jesus is essential, not just for Christians but for wider society, because his influence is so wide. The reality of an individual who has set the western calendar, permeated human thought and history for over two

The reality of an individual who has set the western calendar, permeated human thought and history for over two thousand years, and influenced the culture of the dominant nations for a millennium demands to be taken seriously.

thousand years, and influenced the culture of the dominant nations for a millennium demands to be taken seriously. The huge questions about just who Jesus is are more than mere theological musings.

And getting Jesus right is also vital because those who claim to follow him do so much in his name.

When they get his identity wrong, we see the cruelty of the Crusades, the Inquisitions and entrenched political conservatism. When they get it right, they are inspired to lead socio-political campaigns, battle slavery and establish humanitarian services. This Jesus turns out to be far more at home in the issues affecting communities than he is in ivory towers or church politics.

And though secularists once dreamed that by now he would be fading into the obscurity of primitive superstition, Jesus has proved irresistibly resilient. His followers simply will not go away and his words won't fade. Outlawed in twentieth-century Albania, Russia and China, Christians there have re-emerged in the twenty-first century with greater force, talking incessantly about him. He is culturally adaptable but never captivated by any one culture. In Africa, Latin America, eastern Europe or Northern Ireland, his followers emerge as critical prophets against the status quo. Properly heard and understood, there has always been something revolutionary about his claims – not only about himself but about what it means to be human. As New Testament scholar D. A. Carson reminds us, the gospel is always “subverting and overthrowing the categories of culture”.⁸

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And Jesus' words are far-reaching. If in fact it is true that he is the only way to God, then other religions are implicated. If God will only save us because of Jesus,⁹ then every individual is obliged to accept or reject that claim. If Jesus is real, everyone is drawn into conversation with him. We only escape that conversation if we can satisfy our intellect that Jesus as the son of God was simply imagined by a handful of Jewish folk two thousand years ago and remains the great delusion of more than two billion people alive today.