

DINNER WITH JESUS

In St. Paul, Minnesota, there's an outdoor sculpture of Lucy who keeps Charlie Brown rooted in reality. The cartoon's creator was the late Charles Schultz, a native of St. Paul. When Schultz first presented the concept for what became the most popular cartoon ever to the local newspaper, the editor told him it wasn't imaginative, clever, or very funny. The sculpture is a reminder that intelligent people can get it wrong at times.

There's a **Family Guy** episode on You Tube called, *Dinner with Jesus*. The family is sitting at the table and the son asks, "How do we know you are really Jesus? Can you do miracles?" The bearded white guy in a flowing robe is obviously Jesus. And he says, "Sure. Watch this." And Jesus turns dinner into hot fudge sundaes for everyone. Then, Jesus tells the story of his crucifixion and resurrection. The dad, star of *The Family Guy*, says, "**I can top it.**"

Combine these two examples and you get intelligent people hard at work to top the gospel story of Jesus. How many versions of Jesus can our culture swallow? Jesus the rabbi who married, had children, got divorced, moved to France, and wrote John's Gospel. Jesus the mild-mannered teacher of aphorisms revealed in the *Gospel of Thomas*. The "I have no idea why I'm here" Jesus. Some of this material makes about as much sense as the story told to Dutch children: If you are naughty, Santa will come to our house with six to eight black men, who will stuff you in a sack and take you to Spain. As interesting as all these characterizations are, I have a basic concern: **I don't want to face death with a fake Jesus; I don't want to walk through the valley of the shadow of death with a nice quotable Jesus who had no idea who in hell he really is. And I don't want to face the challenges of life "with just Jesus and me" – I want to face it with the Jesus and his body, the church.**

There's a philosophical word for these ideas: gnostic, from gnosis meaning knowledge. The Gnostics were a group of second and third century Christians who had variant beliefs about Jesus (not really divine/not really human), creation (evil matter created by a secondary deity, not God Almighty) and salvation (through knowing secret knowledge and passwords; that would be trouble for me because I can't remember half my passwords for Facebook and etc). Gnosticism teaches that some humans at least have within them a divine spark which needs to be uncovered or revealed, giving its initiates a secret "knowledge." This enables the initiate to escape into a spiritual world.

Well, Colossae was a target-rich environment for gnostic ideas. The faith at Colossae had the look of Cajun jambalaya: a little bit of everything: Judaism, Gnosticism, Christianity, and local beliefs. No doubt the Christians in Colossae were intelligent people. They were not two scrolls short of a library. They read everything, soaked up knowledge like sponges, and reveled in secret knowledge, code words, and “mysterious things.” According to Colossians 2, they had a practice that translates as “Walking in the middle of the air.” They had experiences of levitation. They had a little motto of moral rigor: “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch.” These Christians were being spiritual and taking religion seriously, but struggling with the idea of a flesh and blood Jesus.

Paul uses one of the Colossians’ own baptismal hymns to challenge these practices. Practically every phrase of this hymn refutes gnostic practices/arguments: Jesus is the image of the invisible God, (**God of God, light of light, very God of very God**), the firstborn of all creation. All things have been created through him and for him. In him all things hold together (This is the most amazing claim – Jesus, the primal energy, “the fire in the equations,” that keeps the galaxies in their orbits. Take Jesus away and the opposite of the “Big Bang” occurs: the universe explodes into nothingness.) He is the head of the body, the church (In the ancient world, the human body was a microcosm of the universe, so Jesus is also head of the universe); he is the firstborn from the dead (“The resurrection is in part about the sheer toughness and persistence of God’s love. When we have done our worst, God remains committed to being God. God was God even while God in human flesh was dying on the cross; God is God now in the new life of Jesus raised from death.”) In him all the fullness of God dwelled (A favorite image of early Christians to explain Jesus as God: light one candle from another, and you don’t have any less of the first flame and you do have a flame as bright and hot as the first.) and through him God reconciled the entire cosmos, by making peace through the blood of his cross. This is the conviction set of the New Testament.

Well, Gnosticism says: “HELLO BOYS! I’M BACK!” It has done us the favor of challenging us to investigate the NT and see if Christianity is based on a mistake. The current version denies divinity and sees Jesus as just human. Scholars line up to insist that no sane first century Jew could even conceive of the idea of incarnation, let alone believe it of himself. Of course there is Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*, and explicitly religious

works such as Bart Ehrman's *Misquoting Jesus*, Elaine Pagel's *The Gnostic Gospels*, Bishop Spong's *Saving the Bible from Fundamentalism*, and Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, and Tim LaHaye and *The Left Behind* fiction novels. What makes this critique difficult is the respect I have for the works of Spong, Borg, and Pagels.

There is a love of conspiracy theories among the new Gnostics. Tom Long tells of a radio talk show host, oblivious to Christian theology and history, saying, "I'd like to find out what really happened at this – what did they call it – Council of Nicaea. I understand that all of the bishops in the church met behind closed doors and **voted that Jesus was God!** And the vote was very close!" Look, the church votes on some crazy stuff, but this guy believed that the bishops piled into a secret room, lobbied for votes, twisted arms, and hatched a plot to improve their pension plans by voting Jesus into divine status. The claim for Jesus being divine actually goes back to the New Testament, but why bother with the facts in a world that can't tell fact from fiction or fake news from real news.

Why are these conspiracy theories so fascinating? American religion breeds gnostics like rabbits: democratic and individualistic impulses, entrepreneurial instincts, revivalism, moralism, and psychotherapeutic preoccupations combine to populate the pews with gnostics. The more inward, the more individualistic, the more spiritual, the more we tend to like it. But political virtues produce theological viruses. Yet, we are all ears when the conspiracy theorists tell us that the church has hidden the real truth about Jesus from us all these centuries, that there are other gospels, like the Gospel of Thomas, that didn't make it into the New Testament, and that this was a power move by the church to keep the truth about Jesus from us, that the four Gospels fabricated the divinity of Jesus in order to maintain political power for the church, and that the true spiritual message of Jesus was hushed up by the church. We are told that Jesus was a mere human being who offered us an individual spiritual salvation. The conspiracy theorists claim that the only choice is for us to give up the gospel story of Jesus and return to the hidden and hushed-up story of Jesus as a human teacher with encoded spiritual messages for us. As much as the new Gnostics claim to love Jesus, some of them have left the church and leaving the church means leaving Jesus. One of these popular writers brands himself "the happy agnostic." Well, I'd rather my critical partners come from within the church, committee meetings, fellowship dinners in hot dining rooms, praying, singing, worshiping, and besides, if

you don't hear long sermons on a regular basis you have not paid enough penance to attack the church.

Our text is liturgical material – words remembered, sung, recited every Lord's Day by the church. It's how we find out who we are. When we believe that too much repetition of our story, too frequent observance of the Lord's Supper could cause it to lose meaning, we are making too little of the power of ritual as “**consecrated behavior.**” Ritual generates religious conviction. It involves learning and shapes how we will behave in the future.

Here are snapshots of meals with Jesus to hang in the living room of our minds. There's Mary and Martha, in our gospel reading, eating with Jesus and Martha learning that true learning at the feet of Jesus is essential for disciples. In our culture there's such a lack of humility about theological learning. Everyone with a church membership record has opinions. Any person with a Bible and a warm, fuzzy feeling thinks God has called him to preach and open still another store front church: The Totally Different Church of Jesus Christ that is superior to all those all old denominational churches. There's Zacchaeus at lunch with Jesus, repenting and coughing up his ill-gotten gains – perhaps the most expensive lunch in history. Our greed-infested culture take note. There's Simon Peter at breakfast with Jesus after the resurrection – restored and forgiven. The meals Jesus shared with his friends are powerful narrative speech acts demonstrating the theological statement: “The word became flesh and dwelled among us.” When we gather to receive the Lord's Supper we should be wearing seat belts. When we eat the bread and drink the cup there's no telling what Jesus might call us to do: Learn like Martha, follow like Matthew, give like Zacchaeus, or repent like Peter.

The new Gnostics are interesting, intelligent, even entertaining, but I offer you Jesus Christ – head of the church, king of the universe, and director of the universe. And we can keep this Jesus and our intellectual integrity. We can change our ways of talking about Jesus, our metaphorical constructs without changing our relationship with Jesus. Paul has told us we needed Jesus on that cross to reconcile the world and that we need Jesus to hold this universe together. So hold on to Jesus. Don't ever let go. Hold fast to Jesus, from whom the whole body, the church, is nourished and held together, and grows with a growth that is from God. AMEN.