

GROWING Together

13th Series

DID JESUS REALLY SAY THAT?

Have you ever asked yourself that question? Many of us assume that every word attributed to Jesus in the New Testament was indeed his.

A helpful exercise is to read each gospel in one sitting. After reading all four, one may be struck by similarities and differences. Similarities are due to common sources. Differences may be due to the author's perspective or to a number of sources being used. Authors sought to meet the needs of their specific readers.

“I CANNOT COME” TO THE PARTY

Matthew (22:1-14) and Luke (14:16-24) each tell the familiar story of a wedding feast or banquet. These two versions probably come from a common source, no doubt including some actual words of Jesus. Further light on the sayings of Jesus may be found in the Gospel of Thomas, part of the Nag Hammadi Library discovered in Egypt in 1945. In this “gospel” there are 114 sayings attributed to Jesus, but without any narrative, actions, or miracles. In saying #64 of Thomas there is yet another version of this parable of the dinner party.

Did Jesus really say everything attributed to him in the Gospel of Thomas? Probably not! But then, did Jesus say everything attributed to him in the four gospels of our Bible? Probably not, or at least, not exactly as we find them written!

“RED LETTER” BIBLES

Many people own a Bible in which all of Jesus' sayings are printed in red. While such “red letter” editions may be handy in locating a quotation, they raise a question: Are these words of Jesus more God's Word than the words of a prophet, apostle, or evangelist? If we believe the Bible to be the Word of God, whether Jesus actually said something found in the Bible is irrelevant. The words are still God's Word to us. Thus, at the level of faith, who was the actual author or speaker is unimportant.

However, at the level of biblical interpretation, the likely source of a text may be important. Does the text reflect Jesus' actual words, the faith of his immediate followers, or the needs of the early Church? The Second Vatican Council pointed out three such stages by which Jesus' teachings have come to us.

In the first stage Jesus spoke to his followers, using the reasoning and knowledge of his time. The second occurred when Jesus' followers, realizing after Easter who he was, passed on these words of Jesus. They now interpreted the words with a new understanding, reflecting what they thought their listeners required. At the third stage, the authors of the gospels selected only some of the available sayings of Jesus and combined others (compare the Sermon on the Mount, Mt 5-7 with the Sermon on the Plain, Lk 6:17-49). This they did to meet the needs of their readers, now a part of an organized Christian community.

Recently a group known as the Jesus Seminar has capitalized on the idea of the “red letter” Bible. They have colour-coded the sayings of Jesus based on various levels of probability of him saying something (eg. that's really Jesus, sort of sounds like Jesus, may be based on something Jesus said, or not likely his words at all!). The Jesus Seminar places almost all of Jesus' words found in the Gospel of John in that last category. On the other hand, the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:30-35) is seen by them as authentic to Jesus, representative of him as the teller of provocative parables. For our faith, such a distinction between sayings, as well as separating the sayings from the narrative and views of the evangelist, is irrelevant. Jesus the Lord of the Church speaks to us in and through the Word of God.

Questions for discussion:

1. What difference does it make to your faith if something attributed to Jesus was rephrased to reflect the theology of the writer or meet the needs of his readers?
2. Try to obtain a copy of the Gospel of Thomas (church or pastor's library, public library, Bible Society bookstore, etc.). Compare the “dinner party” parable in #64 of Thomas with Mt 22:1-14 and Lk 14:16-24. Which might be closest to the original saying of Jesus? Why?
3. Which sayings of Jesus, do you think, are most likely original to him? Why?
4. If the Jesus Seminar is correct, such a passage as Jesus' High Priestly Prayer (John 17:1-26) could not be directly from him. Does this change the importance of this passage for you or our ecumenical discussions? Why would this and other John passages seem not to be from Jesus himself?

The 1997 Growing Together Series was written cooperatively by: Dr. Chris Lind (Anglican), Rev. Dr. Ken Peterson (Lutheran), Rita Gillies (Roman Catholic), Nicholas Jesson (Roman Catholic) and Rev. Betty Lynn Schwab (United). Special thanks to Frank Roy, our editor.

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Saskatoon Centre for Ecumenism
1006 Broadway Ave.
Saskatoon, SK S7N 1B9
(306) 653-1633