

The Teachings of Jesus Christ and Their Effect on Society

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2020

A. Because of the need for brevity, our treatment of Jesus's teachings in the discussion of Postulate 2 in Part II of Chapter Three left out of account the fact that no one knows for certain what Jesus actually taught.¹ For our purposes, however, this is not important, because our concern is not with Jesus himself but with the question of whether any body of teachings, unsupported by practical action (such as the building of powerful organizations committed to those teachings), can be effective in guiding human behavior on a mass basis. Hence, what matters for our purposes is what the early Christians believed the teachings of Jesus to have been. Were the teachings they believed to have been those of Jesus effective in guiding human behavior on a mass basis?

There is a further complication: The early Christians didn't all believe exactly the same things about Jesus. There originally were something like twenty gospels,² and even as to the four canonical gospels (Matthew, Mark:, Luke, and John) the "evidence suggests that in the early church each congregation would have had its own gospel—exposure to all four might not have been typical until at least the end of the second century."³ This however does not pose a serious problem for us, because the four canonical gospels presumably represent, to a reasonable approximation, what the main currents in early Christianity believed the teachings of Jesus to have been, and as we saw in Part II of Chapter Three, the canonical gospels proved ineffective in guiding human behavior on a mass basis.

This was true even though Christians did eventually form powerful organizations, mainly the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. These were committed to the propagation of certain religious doctrines—and, of course, to building their own power. In this they were successful. They were also successful to a limited extent in molding human behavior. But what matters for us here is the fact that human behavior was not molded in such a way as to make any substantial fraction of the population of the world's Christian lands behave in accord with the original teachings of Jesus (or what the majority of early Christians believed to be his teachings).

B. To the evidence offered in Part II of Chapter Three, the following can be added:

- The Gospels condemn adultery and fornication,⁴ yet an edict of (Pope) Callixtus I (approximately 217-222 ADD gave the Church's approval to sexual relationships between upper-class Roman matrons and their male slaves.⁵ It's true that Callixtus I was a maverick, and his action was by no means typical for Christian clergy of the time, but he would hardly have issued his edict if there hadn't

¹ Freeman, pp. 19-30.

² Ibid., pp. 20-21. See also pp. 97-99.

³ Ibid., p. 73.

⁴ E.g., Matthew 5:27 & 32, 15:19; Mark 7:21; Luke 18:20. See also I Corinthians 7:2, and Augustine, II.3.7, p. 28; II.6.14, pp. 33-34; X.30.41, p. 223.

⁵ Harnack, p. 210. Callixtus I was Bishop of Rome but not technical/ a pope, because the Bishops of Rome at that time were not yet titled "Pope." See Freeman, pp. 315-16.

been significant numbers of Christian matrons who were already involved in such relationships and therefore were committing fornication if not adultery. No one having even a superficial acquaintance with the history of Europe in later centuries will claim that the teachings of the Gospels have had any substantial effect on adultery and fornication,⁶ unless among a tiny minority of rigorists and ascetics.

- At some time between 195 and 240 AD, the distinguished Christian writer Tertullian railed against rich and noble Christian women who went around all dolled up and defended their adornments on the ground that they would have been conspicuous as Christians if they had dressed otherwise.⁷ As to female adornment in later times, it is hardly necessary to comment.

C. For whatever it's worth, we note that what we've argued here does not constitute an attack on Christianity as a religion. Christian doctrine— if this writer understands it correctly—holds that Jesus came not to change the way affairs were conducted in this world, but to provide human beings with a path to salvation in some future life.

⁶ See, e.g., Elias, pp. 154-55.

⁷ Harnack, p. 62n3. For dates, see Freeman, p. 180.

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