



Sharing the Good News!

Penn Northeast Conference of the United Church of Christ

MIRRORING CHRIST

One of the most famous statements in all of biblical scholarship comes from the caustic pen of a defrocked Catholic priest by the name of George Tyrrell. Tyrrell apparently had a hard time getting along with a lot of people, including his own. For in one particularly memorable statement, published in 1909, he blasted both his Catholic faith *and* one of the leading Protestant thinkers of his day—the liberal (i.e., non-orthodox) theologian Adolf Harnack:

"The Christ that Harnack sees, looking back through nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a Liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well."¹

Here's the point of Tyrrell's criticism: when Harnack read the Gospels to discover who Jesus Christ was and how he impacts the Church today, the "Christ" he conjured up in his mind was little more than a reflection of his (i.e., Harnack's) own personality, motivations, and worldview. (I suspect Harnack would have vigorously demurred!)

Tyrrell's opinion of this famous Protestant's "Search for Jesus" back in the nineteenth century was shared by other critics, including a very famous Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Albert Schweitzer! Long before he became a physician and went as a medical missionary to a very dangerous part of West Africa, Schweitzer had earned a doctorate in (liberal Protestant) theology, and had written a book (published in 1901) that took apart virtually all of the historical scholarship on Jesus that had been published in the two preceding centuries.

The point of his critical remarks, repeated again and again throughout his paradigm-shifting book,² was that both Protestant and Catholic "experts" on the life and ministry of Jesus should be faulted for projecting their own self-images into their respective portraits of the Man of Galilee.

¹ *Christianity at the Crossroads*, p. 49.

² *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*.

And we are all guilty of this, to some degree—are we not?

Last month, we heard the exciting announcement of Jesus' birth; and so we embarked on a journey with the shepherds and the wise men to "O little town of Bethlehem" to view the "round yon virgin mother and child."

But by January 17th (following the lectionary), we find him bursting upon the biblical scene fully grown and ready to "do battle" for the kingdom of God. *The question is, which Jesus do we want to see?*

Some of us will look for the DOMESTICATED CHRIST. This is the gentle Savior, meek and mild, who comforts us in our human predicament, assures us in our frailty, and from whom never is heard a discouraging word (*now where is that found in the Bible?*). This is the Christ we long to have look after us, to meet our needs, to be available to us at our beck and call, and to affirm all that we and our congregation do—as not too hot, not too cold, but *just right!*

Beware! Another Christ may appear instead! I can't say for sure, since this Christ is so unpredictable. The DARING CHRIST comes to us with demands that force us out of our comfort zone. Sure, he says he will be with us, even to the ends of the earth—but then he turns around and actually sends us into situations that make us feel we're at earth's edge!

The DARING CHRIST is full of vim and vigor. He is never comfortable with the status quo, and so he keeps pushing us onward into an uncertain future with little more than radical faith to suspend us precariously above the abyss of our unfulfilled desires and fears of failure.

The DARING CHRIST is by no means a mere reflection of our own faces gazing timidly into a well of our own self-consciousness. But wonder of wonders, as we pause from our Christian service to gaze back into the well of faith, what we may discover is that *our* faces are becoming like *his* face!

So which Christ are you looking for this year? One of your own self-satisfied imagination, or one that truly blows your socks off?

Albert Schweitzer encountered the DARING CHRIST. That's why he devoted the rest of his life to Christian ministry for others (and won the Nobel Prize). Do you want to meet him too?

-Toby Holleman, Associate Conference Minister

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