

A Brief Rebuttal to Borg and the Jesus Seminar

by Robert P. Wise (RPW@wisecarter.com)

Marcus Borg and the Jesus Seminar challenge us to respond to the question Jesus posed to Peter: “But what about you... Who do you say I am?” (Mt. 10:15). The following is a short rebuttal to the responses of the Jesus Seminar and Borg to that question.

What is the Jesus Seminar?

- Marcus Borg is a prominent member of the Jesus Seminar.[\[i\]](#)
- The Seminar is 50 scholars who have cast votes on each of the sayings of Jesus to determine their opinion of their authenticity by voting with colored beads[\[ii\]](#):

Red bead – Jesus definitely said it
Pink bead – Jesus might have said it
Gray bead – Jesus probably did not say it
Black bead – Jesus definitely did not say it

- The result? 82% of the attributed sayings of Jesus in the Gospels were not said by him according to the Seminar.[\[iii\]](#)
- The Gospel of Mark, regarded by most scholars as the earliest and most reliable of the Synoptic Gospels, is reduced to one (1) phrase (“Render unto Caesar those things that are Caesar’s and to God those things that are God’s”).[\[iv\]](#)
- From the miscellaneous scripts that are left—18% of Jesus’ sayings—Borg & the Seminar purport to give us the real Jesus in their version of the Gospels, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (1993).

Who are the Jesus Seminar Scholars?

- None are from the first string divinity schools of Yale, Princeton, Duke, Union, Emory or Chicago. [\[v\]](#)
- None are from the great universities of England or the Continent. [\[vi\]](#)
- Borg, for example, teaches at Oregon State.
- Yet, these 50 [\[vii\]](#) scholars, a minority in their views and methods among Biblical scholars, generate far more than their share of headlines—seeing their quotes placed in the Christmas cover issues, for example, of *Time* and *Newsweek*. [\[viii\]](#)

What are the Claims of the Jesus Seminar ?

- Their claims are based on the 18% of Jesus’ sayings they retain. Among them:
- “Jesus did not ask us to believe that his death was a blood sacrifice, that he was going to die for our sins.” [\[ix\]](#)
- “Jesus did not ask us to believe that he was the messiah. He certainly never suggested that he was the second person of the trinity. In fact, he rarely referred to himself at all.”
- “Jesus did not call upon people to repent, or fast, or observe the Sabbath. He did not threaten with hell or promise heaven.”
- “Jesus did not ask us to believe that he would be raised from the dead.”

- “Jesus did not ask us to believe that he was born of a virgin.”
- “Jesus did not regard scripture as infallible or even inspired.”
- That the Lord’s Prayer was unsaid by our Lord. [\[x\]](#)
- That Jesus never said that He would return. [\[xi\]](#)
- “[R]ather than being the exclusive revelation of God, [Jesus] is one of many mediators of the sacred.” [\[xii\]](#)

The Jesus Seminar’s Challenge to the Church

- The Seminar claims that they intended to counter the “religious establishment” and televangelists. [\[xiii\]](#)
- But the Seminar has challenged the main line churches at their very boundaries of identity: the Creeds and the canonical Scriptures. [\[xiv\]](#)
- Thus, to the Jesus Seminar, Jesus was not in his lifetime “of one Being with the Father;” nor, according to Borg, the “Messiah or ...the Son of God in some special sense”. [\[xv\]](#)
- Rather, Jesus was a mere peasant sage, spirit person and movement founder. [\[xvi\]](#)

But Consider:

- The Seminar’s picture of Jesus is based on their exclusion of most of what Jesus is reported to have said in the Gospels. For example, Borg’s contrasts of the Synoptics and the Book of John, leading him to claim, “they cannot both be accurate”, requires that, “...Borg denude the Synoptics of all christologically focused passages or nuances, declaring them later accretions to the Jesus tradition.” [\[xvii\]](#)
- The Seminar’s method of voting ensured that few of the sayings of Jesus would receive a pink or red vote.
- The vote is based on percentages.
- Therefore, a saying will end up in the gray category as a supposed consensus even if the saying received as many votes in the red/pink categories as in the gray/black; the 50% consensus for red/pink is insufficient to place the saying in the authentic categories. [\[xviii\]](#)
- In fact, sayings did not receive the coveted red designation unless they received a 75% vote of the Seminar. [\[xix\]](#)
- The Seminar placed the burden of proof on those advocating authenticity. [\[xx\]](#)
- One criteria, for example, would be the reporting of the saying in a secondary, contemporary source such as the history by Josephus. Little or no weight was given to the fact the sayings appear in the Synoptics, as historic documents. This is akin to researching the history of a Long Island town by ignoring the local newspapers while researching for occasional mentions in the New York Times.
- “The publication of The Five Gospels explicitly reveals the saddest paradox about the Jesus Seminar. It has taken fundamentalism as its greatest enemy. But the Seminar ultimately shares the same literalism and historical positivism that characterize fundamentalism. ... Now, other ‘fundamental convictions’ concerning who Jesus must be are taken to be ‘historically accurate’... The portrait is different but the technique in painting is the same.” [\[xxi\]](#)
- “This is not responsible, or even critical scholarship. It is a self-indulgent charade.” [\[xxii\]](#)
- The Seminar participants, “accommodate the Bible to their own unbelief.” [\[xxiii\]](#)

“But What About You...Who Do You Say I Am?”

- “It becomes clear in this latest book that Borg sees compassion as so central to Jesus’ teaching that it is categorically impossible to contemplate a Jesus or even a Paul who might demand moral purity.” [\[xxiv\]](#)

- Jesus is not just another teacher or one more “mediator of the sacred” on par with Mohammed. He is the perfect and ultimate manifestation of the sacred. [\[xxv\]](#)
- If Jesus did not consciously assume the role of Messiah, then why was he charged with blasphemy, dying beneath the sign, “King of the Jews”? [\[xxvi\]](#)
- “None of the authorities, whether Roman or Jewish, could have reckoned with the event that confounded all their calculations: Jesus’ rising from the dead and appearing to his disciples ‘alive again after his passion’. Not even the disciples themselves had reckoned with it; it took them quite by surprise. But it transformed them almost on the spot from a crowd of demoralized and frightened people into a band of men with a mission and purpose in life which, without delay, they proceeded to translate into action. ...[W]ithin a few weeks after his death they appear as a coherent, vigorous and self-propagating community in Jerusalem.” [\[xxvii\]](#) How could this have happened unless the resurrection was real?
- The Seminar suggests the “high Christology” of Jesus—his “messianic claims, the miracles, the substitutionary atonement, the resurrection”—all were added later by a persecuted church in need of a powerful God when in fact the real Jesus was just a pleasant peasant who somehow managed to get himself crucified. [\[xxviii\]](#) In fact, it was Paul’s Epistles, the earliest completed writings concerning Jesus, that present a high Christology. Paul, who personally heard Christ on the road to Damascus, started the Epistles in 45 AD, just 13 years after the death of Jesus in 32AD, and continued the Epistles through his death in 68 AD. [\[xxix\]](#)
- Paul wrote while the disciples were still alive and kept in touch with Peter and James in Jerusalem. Paul could hardly have made up untrue attributes of Jesus at a time when so many eyewitnesses were still alive who actually saw and heard Jesus. [\[xxx\]](#) Nor would Paul and the disciples have risked so much and acted so strenuously to spread the Gospel for a mere peasant sage executed by the authorities.

The Real Jesus:

- Paul presents “the real Jesus” accurately and vividly in his letter to the Philippians: [\[xxxi\]](#)

Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the Glory of God the Father. (Philippians: 2:1-11)

This second piece, "Borg vs. The Jesus of Matthew" I prepared and passed out at St. Andrew's Episcopal Cathedral, in the Dean's Forum, just as Marcus Borg was to start speaking three weeks ago--much to the apparent distress of his advocates there. [Robert P. Wise](#), Jackson, Mississippi USA

BORG VS. THE JESUS OF MATTHEW

At some point our polite 'tolerance', 'reconciliation' and 'openness' that come to us naturally as Episcopalians run up upon the hard line of the Nicene and Apostles Creeds. Either one can affirm the faith through the Nicene and Apostles Creeds (or have it affirmed for one at one's Baptism) or one can not. If one can not say the Apostles and Nicene Creeds as a believer, I suggest one can not call oneself an Episcopalian - a Unitarian perhaps, but not an Episcopalian (see Art.VIII of the 39 Articles of Religion at the back of the Book of Common Prayer).

Mr. Borg in his book "Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time" (Harper Collins,1994) (hereinafter,

"Meeting Jesus") presents just such a challenge to the Creeds, stating, for example, after a long discussion:

"The multiplicity of early Christological images: "son" and "wisdom" and others--leads to the recognition that his language is metaphorical. ...This recognition subverts the common impression that Christian faith involves believing that Jesus was literally the Son of God.' It is a helpful subversion." Meeting Jesus p. 110.

In an adult Sunday School class we are exploring the Gospel of Matthew in some depth. I therefore offer the following contrasts between Mr. Borg's statements in Meeting Jesus and the words of Jesus in Matthew, or, in one instance, between Borg and the words of John R.W. Stott, Anglican Rector Emeritus of All Souls Church, London, from his commentary, The Message of the Sermon on the Mount (Inter-Varsity Press, 1978).

Marcus Borg: The first, which counters a central element in the popular image of Jesus, is that the self-understanding and message of the pre-Easter Jesus were in all likelihood nonmessianic. By this I mean simply that we have no way of knowing whether Jesus thought of himself as the Messiah or as the Son of God in some special sense. (Emphasis original). Meeting Jesus p. 29.

Matthew: "Simon Peter answered, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven." Mt 16: 16-17.

"He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me." Mt 10:40

Marcus Borg: In John, Jesus speaks as a divine person. The great "I am" statements (I am the "bread of life", the "light of the world," "the vine", the "way, the truth and the life," and so on) are all peculiar to John...In the synoptic gospels, Jesus speaks very differently; his message is not about himself or his identity. Meeting Jesus, p. 11.

Matthew: "At that time Jesus said, 'I praise you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him'." Mt 11: 25-27

"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me." Mt. 5:11-12

Marcus Borg: The image I have sketched views Jesus differently: rather than being the exclusive revelation of God, he is one of many mediators of the sacred. Meeting Jesus, p. 37.

Matthew "As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased'." Mt. 3:16-17.

"While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased'. Listen to him! When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground, terrified. Mt. 17:5-6.

Marcus Borg: To say that God is like a womb is to say that God is like a woman, just as the personification of God as Sophia suggest that God is like a woman; and Jesus is the spokesperson for the compassion of Sophia/God. Meeting Jesus, p. 103.

Matthew "And do not call anyone on earth father, for you have one Father, and he is in heaven." Mt. 23:9.

"This, then, is how you should pray:Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name" Mt. 6:9.

Marcus Borg: The work of a group of scholars known as the Jesus Seminar illustrates this process well. Since 1985, we have met twice a year for the sake of voting on the historical accuracy of the sayings of Jesus. ...A red vote means, "I am pretty sure Jesus said that"; pink, somewhere between "probably" and "more likely yes than no"; gray somewhere between "more likely no than yes" and "probably not; and black, "I'm pretty sure Jesus didn't say that." Meeting Jesus, p. 21

Matthew "The only alternative is to take Jesus at his word, and his claims at their face value. In this case, we must respond to his Sermon on the Mount with deadly seriousness. For here is his picture of God's alternative society. These are the standards, the values and the priorities of the kingdom of God. ...Only when the Christian community lives by Christ's manifesto will the world be attracted and God be glorified. So when Jesus calls us to himself, it is to this that he calls us. For he is the Lord of the counter-culture." J.R.W. Stott, Sermon on the Mount, p. 222.

Marcus Borg: His own self-understanding did not include thinking and speaking of himself as the Son of God whose historical intention or purpose was to die for the sins of the world, and his message was not about believing in him. Rather, he was a spirit person, subversive sage, social prophet and movement founder who invited his followers and hearers into a transforming relationship with the same Spirit that he himself knew, and into a community whose social vision was shaped by ... compassion. Meeting Jesus, p. 119.

Matthew "... he took the twelve disciples aside and said to them, We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!" Mt. 20:17-18.

"...just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Emph.) Mt. 20:28.

[i] Marcus Borg, Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time (Harper Collins 1994) at 21.

[ii] Luke Timothy Johnson (Roman Catholic Priest at Emory's Candler School), The Real Jesus (Harper 1996), at 4-5.

[iii] James R. Edwards, "New Quest, Old Errors", Touchstone, Vol. 9, No. 1 (March 1996) at. 17-18.

[iv] Id.

[v] Luke Timothy Johnson, The Real Jesus, supra, at 3.

[vi] Id.

[vii] Edwards, "New Quest, Old Errors", supra, at 17.

[viii] See Johnson, The Real Jesus, supra at 9-20.

[ix] This and the subsequent 5 quotes are by Robert W. Funk (founder of the Jesus Seminar), "The Gospel of Jesus and the Jesus of the Gospels", The Fourth R (November/December 1993), p. 8, as quoted in Jimmy Williams, "The Jesus Seminar", Probe (www.probe.org/docs/jesussem.html) at 1.

[x] Luke Timothy Johnson, The Real Jesus, supra, at 20.

[xi] Id.

[xii] Marcus Borg, Meeting Jesus, supra at 37.

[xiii] Luke Timothy Johnson, The Real Jesus, supra, at 6.

[xiv] Id. at 23.

[xv] Marcus Borg, Meeting Jesus, supra, at 29.

[xvi] Marcus Borg, Meeting Jesus, supra, at 119.

[xvii] Ben Witherington, III, The Jesus Quest (InterVarsity, 1995), p. 103.

[xviii] Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, supra, at 21-22.

[xix] *Id.* at 22.

[xx] *Id.* at 24.

[xxi] Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, supra, at 26-27.

[xxii] *Id.* at 26.

[xxiii] *Id.* at 17 quoting Pat Robertson.

[xxiv] Ben Witherington, *The Jesus Quest*, supra, at 103.

[xxv] See John R.W. Stott, (Anglican Rector Emeritus of All Souls Church, London), *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1978).

[xxvi] See James R. Edwards, "New Quest Old Errors", supra, at 24.

[xxvii] F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (Doubleday 1980), at 205-206.

[xxviii] Jimmy Williams, "The Jesus Seminar", supra at 6.

[xxix] *Id.* at 6-7.

[xxx] *Id.* at 7-8; Accord., James R. Edwards, "New Quest Old Errors", supra, at 22.

[xxxi] See Tom Wright, *The Original Jesus* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1997) at 76-79.

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