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**Jesus Revolution**

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Was Jesus a conservative or a liberal?

Don't answer that yet—at least not out loud.

"Was Jesus a conservative or a liberal? A churchman or a non-conformist? A governmentalist or an independent? These are interesting and vital questions in days of upheaval like our own."

Those questions and that statement were written by Dr. Samuel Dickey, professor of New Testament at Chicago's McCormick Seminary—in 1917—in dealing with the *issue* or *question* of Jesus being a revolutionary figure.

Over 100 years ago! Funny how things don't change all that much, isn't it?

"Crucifixion was a Roman punishment that was reserved for crimes of sedition—treason—crimes that threatened the state. Most people, if they know nothing else about Jesus, know that He was crucified. So that should tell us something about who He was and what sort of threat He seemed to pose to the rulers of His day."

This was a statement made in 2012 by a fellow named Reza Aslan, an atheist Jew who wrote the book, *Zealot - The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*.

I think people—church people—tend at times, maybe even at most times, to see Jesus as the founder of a lovely, domesticated faith, and as being a somewhat harmless spiritual leader who left behind this body of helpful teaching, inspirational thinking, guidelines to living—all of which we have the option to adopt, or not—and then, of course, free tickets to heaven.

But you know, Reza Aslan is right. This was not Jesus. Jesus was a revolutionary.

Jesus, with regularity and intentionality, said things that really bothered *all* the different establishmentarians of His time.

For example, Jesus defined religion differently from the Jews of His day. They saw religion as rules and regulations to be followed. They wanted everyone to conform to their teachings—even those teachings of theirs which did not come from Scripture.

Like when they became indignant and agitated over the fact that Jesus' disciples didn't perform the ceremonial washing thing before they ate.

In truth, the Pharisees were much better at keeping man's laws than God's laws. In fact, they really seemed to want to keep man's laws more than God's, and for that reason and others, Jesus called them hypocrites.

Jesus also taught different ways of looking at life than the religious teachers of His day—like where He declared, "*It's not what goes into a person that defiles them, but instead what comes out.*" [Mark 7:15]

Or when He said, "*The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath!*" [Mark 2:27]

The establishment didn't like statements like those, because they undermined their program—their way of doing things.

There are many, many more examples:

Matthew 8:22 – "*Let the dead bury the dead.*"

How could Jesus be so insensitive as to provoke a grieving seeker to forego a proper burial for his parents? What about proper grief and ceremony?

Matthew 5:32—also in Mark and Luke, too – "*Whoever divorces and marries another commits adultery.*"

In many ways, the western church has really lost its right to speak to issues concerning sexuality since it has looked the other way when professing Christians divorce without biblical warrant. But the looseness of today had its roots in Jesus' day—that's what He was willing to call out here.

How about Luke 14:26? "*If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters...*"

Of course, this is Jesus driving home the point of the supremacy of loving Him first, but family ties were super, super important in Jesus' day, and His statement here was intensely provocative. Family ties were often so consuming that it left people with little time or resources for God's work—which is still just as true today.

Matthew 5:48 – "*You must be perfect...*"

It had to be exasperating to people to hear this, but then in the next breath hear how far we fall short of perfection. How dare He command this? What was He talking about?

Luke 12:5 – "*Fear him who has power to cast into Hell.*"

This saying doubly offends because it seemingly advocates fear, which people reject as the basis for relationship with God, and also because it threatens the judgment of hell, which some consider contradictory to God's loving character.

Luke 18:22, where Jesus said, "*Sell all that you have and give to the poor...*"

Wait—really?

Matthew 5:39 – "*If someone strikes you on the left cheek, turn to them your right one as well.*"

But what about self-defense? We've waited for years for the ability to conceal carry in Kentucky!

Luke 22:36 – "*Let those who have no sword buy one.*"

Wait a minute, I thought Jesus said we're to love and to turn the other cheek? What does a sword have to do with that?

And then of course there are all those times in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus says, "*You have heard it said 'A, B, C,' but I say to you, X, Y, Z.*"

Dismantling what had become the conventional wisdom of the day—that's what He was doing. Upending the status quo.

Jesus, the revolutionary.

Maybe the most revolutionary thing He ever said he said in Matthew 5:44 – Luke 6:27 records it too – three words: “*Love your enemies.*”

No teaching of Jesus’ has been more attacked, critiqued, slandered, ridiculed, vilified and frankly ignored than His calling on people to love those who hate them, to go the second mile with your oppressors, and to give your shirt to someone who’s already stealing your coat.

Now, I know these statements all rest in context. Especially in a place like this, many of us want to jump in and give explanation to these statements of Jesus. We want to say, “Oh yes, but what Jesus meant by that is... and so forth and so on.”

And that’s all just fine and good. There *are* explanations – there *is* context that needs to be delivered around these things.

But my point is – Jesus spoke with provocation. Jesus said things that shocked people, because His words *and His ways* were *far* from *conventional* – *far* from the status quo.

It’s been said that Jesus brought comfort to the afflicted and affliction to the comfortable. That’s quite true, although I would add that, at times, he brought both to both.

At one point, even His disciples admitted that what he said was hard to hear. In chapter 6 of his gospel, John reports, “*On hearing Jesus’ words, many of His disciples said, ‘This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?’*” [John 6:60]

Even those who knew Him best had trouble accepting His teaching. Revolutionary, you see?

Now, not *revolutionary* in the sense of a Lenin or a Trotsky, who advocated for the forceful overthrow of the government *du jour*. Those guys wouldn’t have recognized Jesus in that way.

But is that because Jesus was *less* of a revolutionary than they were, or *more* of one?

You may think “less” because Jesus didn’t raise an army to overthrow the power structures that he confronted. But maybe He didn’t do that because He designed their demise to come by the coming of His Kingdom.

I’ve been thinking a lot about Jesus’ revolutionary ways and words in these days – when it seems like so much of our own political system is just perpetually “triggered.” Everybody is on edge and ready to pounce with claws out.

Everybody, from the president on down, is attacking and reacting instead of responding.

You know, even just 15 years ago or so, I remember complaining about watching congress members and senators on news shows and other places rail against each other and say completely different sorts of things – but you just knew they didn’t really mean it in their hearts. You knew they were all going out to eat, or drink, together after the show – whatever it was – was over.

I remember thinking, “They’re so two-faced. None of them really mean what they say.”

I remember thinking this, especially, about James Carville and Mary Matalin – you remember them? James is

a democratic strategist and Mary is a Republican strategist – and they got married! Can you imagine that? I remember thinking when that happened, either one or both of them can’t really believe what they say – either that or their marriage has to be just awful!

You know, I learned just the other day that they are still married – and that they credit the endurance of their marriage to making and keeping a commitment to never talk politics at home. So good for them!

But with regard to congress, a page has turned in our nation in the last ten years. It seems like at least some of those who are speaking now really believe what they’re saying. Some of them believe they can really bring a political revolution to our nation. Others see great danger in that – in the direction they want to go – and feel they have to stop it.

So – revolution. Some want to carry one out. Some believe they must keep it from happening.

At times, on the face of it, I wish we could go back to the days when everybody only *seemed* to disagree, but were really on the same page behind the scenes.

But you know – not really – I don’t really wish that, because that would mean going back to days that were even more dishonest than today. And although that seemed more peaceful, it’s crazy to wish for dishonesty.

Wish for charity and patience and common courtesy – but not dishonesty.

Anyway, in these days of the potential for revolution, – charged up by the presidential election campaigns – I’m going along, thinking about all these sorts of things when a book that I have never seen before – a book that I didn’t know *existed*, much less that I *owned* – literally fell off the bookshelf in my study at home and into my hands.

And this is the book. Can you read the title? *Christ’s Alternative to Communism* – written by Asbury College alumnus E. Stanley Jones.

*Christ’s Alternative to Communism.*

And, if the title isn’t intriguing enough to you, then get this: Jones wrote this book in 1935, after he had taken a trip to the relatively new communist Russia and saw there some very good things, but of course at the expense of Christianity – and every other faith, for that matter, except for faith in the communist party.

And that caused him angst. Jones wrestles with how the early years of Russian communism really did seem to feed everyone and educate everyone and give everyone a job – and even make people happy and contented. He observed that on his visit.

And yet Jones knew that you don’t get to those things apart from faith in Christ – *without great eventual harm*. It is the Christian faith that calls for things like economic fairness and food for all – those are Kingdom of God values, and he knew that. So it was troublesome to see those things supposedly lived out in a place where Christ was banned, and where those values had been forced upon people. He saw the product, but also the danger.

Aside from that, Jones also wrestled with the shortcomings of capitalism, highlighted especially in the

nineteen teens in the United States – things like the greed of corporations and the way that drove them to abuse their workforce. Underpay and overwork were common in those days. Jones saw the weaknesses there, which fed into his thinking that capitalism without Christ, was not good.

And then, on top of that, living in India as he was, Jones was hearing calls from the church in China – calls to send people from the west into China to help the church there become more soundly established, because many in China, even as early as 1935, were concerned about a possible communist takeover there.

And they were right to be concerned, since that very thing did happen in 1949.

So all this – the turmoil in himself about communism and Kingdom, the weaknesses of the capitalist system as it was, and the calls for help from China – all this moved him to write this book and attempt to describe within, well, the alternative Jesus offers to secular, state-run collectivism – communism.

In disappointment over the capitalistic world order as it was, and in the deep disturbance that he felt about what he calls the “Marxian experiment in Russia,” Jones sought to declare, here, a different world order – one set in motion by Jesus. One that touches on every aspect of world-order-ness: economics, liberty, responsibility, ethics, human worth, and the place and care of mind, body and soul.

He calls it “Jesus’ program.”

Just as communism has a program and capitalism has a program, so does Jesus have a program.

Communism’s program is found in Marx.

Capitalism’s is found, you might say, on Wall Street.

But Jesus’ program, Jones says, is found in here, in the Bible – all through the Bible, of course, but he focuses on one place in particular: Luke 4, verses 1 through 21. Within that larger passage, Jones especially highlights verses 18 and 19, which is where Jesus, in the synagogue of Nazareth, reads the words of the scroll of Isaiah 61:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor.*

*He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted,  
to preach deliverance to the captives,  
the recovering of sight to the blind,  
to set at liberty them that are bruised;*

*To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.*

Jones says this is the heart of the program of Jesus that stands *with*, in some ways, and also *against* in some ways, every ism of our world.

This is the economy and order that God wants for His earth, and that He is trying to bring to His earth through His church.

That’s Jones’ conclusion.

What does that program look like?

I think that’s an important question to address in these days:

- where you have super-power communist nations who are nearer than we know,

- where you have socialists pretending to be democrats and promising massive amounts of free gifts in exchange for votes,  
- and where you have staunch defenders of capitalism who conveniently ignore its weaknesses and failures.

And all of them vying for the soul of Christians and other people of faith.

So maybe it’s time we look at Jesus’ program – and see what He values – which is what I’d like to do on Sunday nights for a little while, with the help of Jones and others.

A leading socialist of the 1920s is quoted as saying, “We socialists would have nothing to do if you Christians had continued the revolution begun by Jesus.”

And you know – he’s right. Jesus came into our world to launch a kingdom revolution, a revolution of the Spirit, a world-changing movement that would overcome evil with good and hatred with love.

His message was a threat to the religious establishment. He called for dramatic, sweeping change. He taught his followers to pray radical prayers like, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,” – meaning, the displacement of the corrupt kingdoms of this world by the perfect kingdom of God.

Jesus called his disciples to revolutionary commitment.

*Time Magazine* did an article on Jesus in 1971 about these very sorts of things. They printed a picture of Him, and next to it was written:

JESUS CHRIST - ALIAS: THE MESSIAH, THE SON OF GOD, KING OF KINGS, LORD OF LORDS, PRINCE OF PEACE, ETC.

> Notorious leader of an underground liberation movement

>Wanted for the following charges:

– Practicing medicine, winemaking and food distribution without a license.

– Interfering with businessmen in the temple.

– Associating with known criminals, radicals, subversives, prostitutes and street people.

– Claiming to have the authority to make people into God’s children.

APPEARANCE: Typical hippie type – long hair, beard, robe, sandals.

> Hangs around slum areas, has a few rich friends, often sneaks out into the desert.

BEWARE: This man is extremely dangerous. His insidiously inflammatory message is particularly dangerous to young people who haven’t been taught to ignore him yet. He changes people and claims to set them free.

WARNING: HE IS STILL AT LARGE!

That was in 1971.

**Is this Jesus still at large today?**

**Is He leading His Church?**

**Is there, in His church, a cultural revolution going on that will recover reverence for God, the respect of honor, the dignity of family, the beauty of morality and the worth of persons?**

As Martin Luther King Jr. warned decades ago, "If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority."

Vernon Grounds, former chancellor of Denver Theological Seminary, once said, "A Christian who

becomes a revolutionary will serve as a revolutionary catalyst in the Church; and by the multiplication of revolutionized Christians, the Church will become a revolutionary catalyst in society; and if society is sufficiently revolutionized, a revolution of violence and force and rights and privilege will no more be needed than a windmill in a world of atomic energy."

Jones saw long ago in Jesus' program – in a Kingdom world – no *-isms* are needed.

Maybe we should stop investing ourselves so heavily in the *-isms*, and instead start seriously chasing that Kingdom world.