

# **Review of John H. Tietjen's The Gospel According to Jesus. (St. Louis: Creative Communications for the Parish, 2006), 83 pp.**

To write a first-person account of the life of Jesus, when that voice is Jesus' own, is a daunting task, rarely undertaken. Even efforts, which have presumed to come close, such as Dostoevsky's *The Grand Inquisitor* or Kazantzakis' *Last Temptation of Christ* or *The Greek Passion*, did not quite manage to get into Jesus' skin to tell the story. Such a work would have to be incredibly reckless or unbelievably faithful. John Tietjen's little volume, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, falls quite clearly into the latter. Published posthumously, it is the author's gift of love and rare insight to the church and, hopefully, beyond.

John Tietjen, of course, is a name, which many in Lutheran circles will recognize, most notably for participating in a period of history that was both painful and yet enormously creative. One will have to check other sources for the account of John Tietjen's life and the controversy in which he found himself embroiled but to many of us Tietjen will forever be remembered and esteemed as a man of faithful, pristine integrity. I am one of those who wore the black T-shirt with pride and which read, "No learnin' without Tietjen." I can speak for most Seminexers whose short list for his/her most influential voices will most certainly include the name John H. Tietjen.

To have known Dr. Tietjen then is to recognize the gift he left the church in his little book, *The Gospel According to Jesus*. In many ways it is a treasure. Of the very few whom I would trust to write a first-person account of the life of Jesus would be this author about whom I would not hesitate to apply the Beatitude (and, no doubt, to the profound embarrassment of the now-sainted writer), "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

I want to say that this is the kind of book someone would write about Jesus if they have seen God.

1. With Simple Prose, A Divinely Human JesusThe book begins its narrative with Mary of Bethany, Lazarus' and Martha's sister. Mary has found a small bundle, containing a scroll written in Jesus' own hand, offering "the life of Master Jesus in his own words" (p. 4).The next eighteen chapters reveal the contents of the scroll. The chapters are written in simple, clear prose and unveil a Jesus who is human, questioning who he is and what the purpose of his life is all about. The reader will quickly find himself relating to the questions and concerns Jesus has because they are of the kind which any person of faith, and even those without such trust, would have. This is as the author intended. "I put Jesus in my shoes, and the story took off" (p. 1). Yet, with characteristic modesty, Tietjen adds, "I have no illusion that I can know what Jesus thought or felt. But the New Testament affirms that Jesus was in every respect (except without sin) a human being as I am. I can put Jesus in my shoes because he has already walked in them" (p. 1).

For Tietjen, however, the goal is something far larger than to present a Jesus who can identify with me. "I am emboldened to tell the Gospel story as I have because, in fact, each Christian life is a Gospel according to Jesus.

All Christians walk in Jesus' steps and live out Jesus' life in their own" (p. 2). No doubt, the author took his cue in part from a common mentor, Martin Luther, who referred to the Christian as a "little Christ" (Christlein) and makes such boldness, as is this account, possible.

The book then, more or less, follows loosely a chronology of Jesus' life, such as one could piece together by the four Gospels. What is striking in Tietjen's approach is that while, true enough, Tietjen's Jesus recounts with increasing clarity Jesus' mission, Tietjen uses the Gospel accounts as they were truly intended: less as histories than as proclamation stories. As Jesus struggles with who he is, while trusting the direction of God, each episode brings new insight for Jesus and clarification of Jesus' calling. Jesus struggles with the Law and its claims, for instance, but always with a view of learning about the promised Son of David and the reign of God that will come through him (p. 13). Jesus is also struck deeply by the figure of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah and how "suffering for the transgressions of the people is to be the work of God's servant" (p. 14). Jesus further tries to make sense out of his encounter with his cousin John and ends up concluding "his (John the Baptist's) call to repentance is too harsh" (p. 18) and that Jesus would have people, instead, "hear the good news in the invitation to return to God and to righteousness" (p. 18). Jesus says, "He (John) demanded. I would invite" (p. 19).

2. The Reign of God If there is a common thread to Tietjen's Jesus and his story, consistent with the Synoptic Gospels, it is the essential theme of the kingdom of God or, as Tietjen's Jesus would have it, "the reign of God." Jesus comes to usher in the reign of God. As students of the

Gospels know, the term constitutes something essential about the gospel, the good news about how life changes with the invitation to trust the reign of God, but with the Synoptic Gospels, there are many blanks to fill in. What does the reign of God entail? What does it mean? What is so good about the good news of that rule? The question is urgent, especially nowadays, when the essentials of the reign of God are taken to have something to do with a fallen world realizing justice and peace as good news. Indeed, Tietjen's Jesus, as Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount, says, "I want the people to understand the differences between the way of the world and the reign of God" (p. 28). In explanation of the differences, Tietjen's Jesus then proclaims (in paraphrasing the Beatitudes):

*"You are blessed when all your ambitious plans don't work. With less of you there is more room for the reign of God in your life. You are blessed when you have lost the person dearest to you. Then you can feel the embrace of the One who holds you most dear. You are blessed when you find yourself owning nothing. Then you will discover the value of all those things that can never be bought. You are blessed when you find yourself hungry and thirsty for goodness. Then you are ready for the best meal God gives anyone." I want the people to see how different life would be for them under the reign of God. "You are blessed when you must spend your life caring for others. In the midst of your caring you will discover how God cares for you... You are blessed when your heart is at peace with God. That's when you begin to see God in the world around you. You are blessed when you show people a better way than fighting all the time. You are sure to find your place in God's family." And then perhaps the most difficult lesson of all, "You are blessed when your work for God causes people to exclude you or even hate you.*

*Their abuse of you strengthens God's reign in your life"*  
(p. 28).

It is interesting that Tietjen's Jesus articulates how promising faith hears such words and makes sense out of them, not as demand (as have often been the case with the Beatitudes) but as promise. Given the history of how the Beatitudes have been otherwise heard (such as the "evangelical counsels" of the medieval church...or, as "law"), Tietjen's Jesus would have us hear them again as promise.

As Jesus develops the theme of the kingdom or reign of God further, Tietjen's Jesus then begins to draw the line a little more sharply between law-keeping as a route to righteousness and the forgiveness of sinners' sins by which even sinners can live under the reign of God. As Matthew is called to be a disciple, Matthew throws a dinner because "Matthew wanted them to see that they (sinners) too could change their lives and live under the reign of God" (p. 33). Jesus is then confronted with the haunting question by "some of the Pharisees," "How dare your teacher eat with sinners?" (p. 33). The radically inclusive character of the reign of God is even pushed further with the incident of the Canaanites woman where Tietjen's Jesus "learned that the benefits of God's reign are not intended just for the lost sheep of the house of Israel but for all people" (p. 38). As with the Gospels, the chapters unfold with the surprise of God's grace announced by Jesus in the reign of God: the woman taken in adultery is rescued by Jesus whose writing in the dirt is about the sins of her accusers (pp. 64-65); the Zaccheus incident (p. 63); and other familiar stories from the Gospels which support Jesus "teaching about the reign of

God who forgives and welcomes all” (p. 63).

The stories Tietjen’s Jesus recounts are meant to reveal the message that the reign of God is inclusive, compassionate and forgiving of any who receive God’s reign through their faith. Jesus even mentions that he does not share the attitudes of his age about women whom Jesus regularly invites to be his disciples along with the precious value of children who participate fully in the reign of God (p. 67).

3. Some Important GapsThere are, however, some important gaps in Tietjen’s narrative. These may be due to the burden of time for the author to have developed before his health succumbed to his disease, but for whatever reason the gaps are there. The chief one is the cross and its many layers of meaning. For Tietjen, a theologian of the cross as John Damm notes in his Forward, not giving the cross its due is conspicuous by its absence, especially when the Gospels themselves so converge on the crucifixion account. To be sure, Tietjen’s Jesus gives the reader some hints that there’s a cross in his future. As Jesus says, “I will continue my work, with God leading me, calling sin by its name and offering God’s forgiveness and peace for all” (p. 47), Jesus then adds to instruct his disciples, “You have to give up your lives for others” (p. 47). Then later, in reflecting on what it might mean to have been twice called “God’s Son,” Jesus states:

*As God’s Son, God is working through me. God could experience through my suffering and death all human suffering and death. Part of the good news would then be that not one of us ever suffers or dies apart from God’s intimate awareness of our suffering and death. God is entering all human experience, including suffering and death through me, God’s Son. It is an awesome thought...*

(pp. 51-52).

Regrettably, this great theme is never developed nor is Jesus' death fleshed out for its meaning about the reign of God, except, perhaps as Jesus tells how he intends to go to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover with the Twelve: "I intend to give them a ritual...remembering my death that will connect us, my broken body and my shed blood" (p. 75). Yet, maybe one of the reasons Tietjen never develops the cross theme nor confronts the crucifixion narrative directly is that his Jesus, while faithfully submitting to the guiding of God, even at the end struggles as he says, "I am sure I am following God's leading, but it is not given to me to understand it" (p. 75). The exception comes as Jesus finds a word to explain to his disciples how they are to be not one another's lords but servants like he. Jesus says, "'Ransom,'" that's the word. It had just flowed out of me" (p. 59). Jesus continues:

*A ransom brings freedom! As I thought about it I realized that word gives one more way to understand the purpose of my suffering and death. I was to suffer and die so that people might be set free from the power of sin and death (p. 59).*

While there is no doubt that Tietjen's Jesus means to link ransom to the cross, it is never really debriefed. One still is left to wonder, "How exactly does that work?"

At any rate, while the cross is implicitly there, The Gospel According to Jesus gives us a Jesus who goes up to Jerusalem and then suddenly in the final chapter gives us a Mary who briefly tells the rest of the story without unpacking its cruciformed meaning and emphasizing the

empty tomb. Yet, even there, it is Mary who wonders what it all could mean, as now the Risen Lord makes his post-resurrection appearances:

*The liveliness in him is greater and freer. He possesses a bigger life. He has a life that we can almost imagine, but have never seen before. Could this be what life is like when one is fully and completely living in what he called the reign of God?...Not merely life after death, a continued living with the same limitations, struggles and pains. Not just restoration to the life they had known before. A new kind of life. Something bigger, freer, more powerful, more beautiful. Resurrection! Life lived to the fullest under the reign of God.*

*Resurrection!*

*We shall all have to pray to understand it!...(p. 83).*

Indeed. One would have hoped for more but Tietjen leaves us with all the great questions about cross, resurrection and the meaning of the reign of God and few answers on how it all ties together. Still, perhaps that is where the author means to leave us: to live the question whose answers are far too awesome for mortals to grasp, except in small parts.

The other gap in the narrative, perhaps flowing from the first, is the under use of the Fourth Evangelist's Gospel. To be sure, the Evangelist's account appears here and there, as Jesus, for example, ponders being "the Lamb of God" (p. 51) or as Jesus confronts the Samaritan woman (pp. 56-57) or with the raising of Lazarus ( pp. 63-65), still the Synoptic accounts are clearly favored. What is at issue in noticing this is that what so captured Luther



in St. John's Gospel, such as the clean distinction between "Moses" on the one hand and "Christ" on the other (e.g., John 1: 17) is never developed in Tietjen's presentation. One wonders if Tietjen's struggling Jesus who, nevertheless, faithfully follows the guidance of God and the Evangelist John's Jesus who continually claims "I am" can be fully squared. But then, again, one could say that about the Synoptic accounts and the Fourth Evangelist's account generally.

4. Conclusion Still, Tietjen's Jesus is compelling, convincing, winsome and credible, as the author has sorted through the overwhelming material from the Gospels and woven this beautiful tapestry together in a simple, clear and elegant way. One of the work's chief strengths is its usefulness for people who want to know, "Who is this Jesus?" Tietjen's answer, coming from the faith of one of God's most gentle and faithful servants, gives an answer worthy of Luther's explanation to the Second Article. "Here is the Jesus who had been all along my Lord." I commend the book highly as an excellent guide to discussing honestly who Jesus is in most any setting. On the strength of the parting gift alone by the author (would that he had had more time to develop it more fully), it will be regarded as a treasure.

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