



BOOK REVIEW: POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND JESUS' "BEST TEST": A REVIEW OF *The Politics of Jesus: Rediscovering the True Revolutionary Nature of the Teachings of Jesus and How They Have Been Corrupted*

[Obery M. Hendricks Jr., Doubleday, 2006. Hardback, \$14.00]

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Obery M. Hendricks, Jr., an accomplished biblical scholar, began this analysis of the political dimension of Jesus with a description of his frustration with his early education, when he was taught about only the meek and otherworldly Christ, the “long-suffering Jesus who was concerned with the things of heaven, with little thought for the matters of this world, matters like social injustice, racial and gender inequities, or the systematic oppression of the poor” (p. 3). He could not square this interpretation with what he was reading in scriptures about the Christ who opposed the Pharisees and other oppressive forces in Israel with vehement words and fierce actions. He found himself asking questions such as, “What did Jesus mean by sayings like ‘I have come not to bring peace, but a sword’?” (p. 2). Throughout his early years, though, he did not encounter any preacher or other believer who talked about this Jesus, “a Jesus who cared not only about our souls but about our earthly circumstances, too.” He was so distraught and disappointed, he wrote, that “in my early teens, I left the Church altogether, vowing never to return. Famous last words” (p. 4).

Decades later, Hendricks' (2006) search for the political Jesus has produced an impressive book of scholarship and insight wherein he combined a thorough description and analysis of the historical contexts for the radical political nature of Jesus' work with a contemporary application of his teach-



ings on national leadership. *The Politics of Jesus* is important and urgently relevant for scholars of servant-leadership; since presidential policies and actions are purported to be divinely guided, as has been claimed by President Bush and others, Hendricks asserted, they need to be analyzed and evaluated according to the teachings of Jesus, the original servant-leader. The question, as Hendricks puts it, is, “Which leaders or political factions, if any, are practicing the politics of Jesus?” (p. 10).

Answering this question is a big task, and the natural response is, “How does the author intend to locate and then measure those practices?” As one might expect, Jesus, who discerned the nature of cause and effect, supplied the answer to this question. Just as Robert Greenleaf (1977/2002) developed the famous “best test” (p. 27) that readers of this journal will know well, Hendricks (2006) wrote that Jesus also developed what we will call a “best test” for the successful human life, outlined in Matthew 25:41-46.

For all of his moral and ethical teachings in the Beatitudes and the parables and in his instructions to his disciples and others, Jesus gave just one criterion for judging the righteousness of our lives:

Then he will say to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed, depart from me . . . for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” Then they . . . will answer, “Lord, when was it what we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. (p. 9)

Using this “best test” guide, Hendricks (2006) explored how many current politicians and preachers and pundits, in spite of their appeals to the authority of Jesus, are diametrically opposed to his teachings. Hendricks divided his book into three sections: (a) the first section explored the development of Jesus’ political consciousness in the crucible of poverty and



oppression that characterized first-century Israel under Roman and priestly rule; (b) the second section analyzed the leadership strategies that Jesus used that made him one of history's greatest leaders with hundreds of millions of voluntary followers; and (c) the final section used the "best test" to evaluate the policies and actions of two American presidents, Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, widely renowned for their private and public embrace of Christianity. Hendricks finished his work with a manifesto and an in-depth description of the politics of Jesus, in his own words and actions, and what they would look like if truly put into service in America today.

Hendricks' (2006) analysis rested on the argument that the entire Judeo-Christian religion is about God's intervention in history to liberate a group of people who are oppressed by crushing political, economic, and social forces. Yahweh's reason for interceding, "according to God's own testimony . . . *was their political plight*" [italics original] (p. 14). The usual interpretation, that Jews were monotheistic and therefore loved by God, is refuted by Hendricks, who pointed out that the First Commandment would be meaningless to Jews if they were not already henotheistic (worshipping one God but recognizing the existence of other deities). "Thus, the liberating action of God in Exodus was not in response to the worship pieties of the Hebrews. It was to their political plight" in Egypt (p. 15). In addition to analyzing Exodus, Hendricks looked at the works of the Judges and the Prophets to build his case that God always enters into human history to take the side of the downtrodden, oppressed, and victimized, a tradition that Jesus continued and brought to the world as the central ethic of human action.

Because past action is the best indicator of future action, the bumper sticker's question, "WWJD?" (What Would Jesus Do?) is best answered by WDJJ? (What Did Jesus Do?). What *did* Jesus do as an intervener in human history? How did he conceptualize his mission? Hendricks (2006) wrote that the concept of *dikaiosune* is often translated from Greek to mean "righteousness" rather than its alternative, "justice" (p. 18). The former



term connotes personal righteousness, while the latter connotes social justice. Jesus, Hendricks pointed out, embodied both definitions, using personal action to further social justice. His life, according to Hendricks, is focused on political action, going so far as to proclaim “the oppression of his people as the focus of his own intervention . . . by choosing the liberation text of Isaiah 61:1-2 as his manifesto: ‘The Spirit of the Lord . . . has anointed me . . . to bring good news to the poor’” (Luke 4:18) (p. 16). And why did they need this “good news”? Simply put, Israel at the time of Jesus was a blood-soaked nightmare for Jews. Modern comparisons elicit the images of Oliver Cromwell or Saddam Hussein, as the Romans murdered entire villages, enslaved whole populations, crucified thousands on the main roads so that they would be visible textbooks to learn about who was in charge. Hendricks used one example, a mass crucifixion in one village, to put it this way:

There is no telling how long the [2,000] crucified victims at Sepphoris lingered before breathing their last. However, we can be sure that their screams and agonized moans would have been a lasting source of fear and trauma for all who witnessed them, even for those who only heard descriptions of the horror. Some sense of the effect that the horror at Sepphoris would have had upon the collective psyche of the people of Israel—including the young Jesus—can be seen in the response of African Americans to the lynching of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till in 1955. Till’s torture and murder induced terror and revulsion in the black community. The grisly images and gruesome descriptions of Till’s mutilated body and the naked fear they raised remain emblazoned to this day in the memory of all who had the misfortune to be exposed to them.

The horrific victimization of Till, and their powerlessness in preventing or addressing it, only deepened the sense of dread in the twenty million African Americans living under the specter of Jim Crow and institutional racism. It is not hard to imagine that the Romans’ crucifixion of two thousand men, women, and children would have struck the same deep fear and dread in the two and a half million subjugated inhabitants of first-century Israel. Yet, as if these mass lynchings were not traumatic enough, the trauma was further compounded by the Romans’ practice of refusing to allow the crucified dead to be removed from their



impalement until their flesh had all but rotted away, thus assailing the senses of every person for miles around not only with the sight of death, but with its overwhelming stench as well. (pp. 51-52)

Hendricks provided many more arguments and examples to build upon the representative case of Sepphoris to argue that Jesus sought political, social, and economic justice in this hell on earth as well as personal redemption, and that he was no wallflower about doing so. He attacked the structural causes of poverty, unjust taxation, crippling debt, crime, and priestly parasitism. In his devotion to freedom and liberty he ran afoul of the Romans and Jewish priests, as many revolutionaries and would-be messiahs did before him, because of his unflagging devotion to the idea of *malkuth shamayim*, the sole sovereignty of God, which “continued as a call to freedom at least as late as the early second century It is said that “*malkuth shamayim*” was the actual cry of . . . freedom fighters as they marched into battle” (p. 21). How then did this revolutionary figure become an exclusively otherworldly figure whose only concern is heaven?

To answer this question, Hendricks (2006) used the concept of *docetism*, a word derived from the Greek word meaning “to seem.” Docetists denied the materiality of Jesus, believing that he was not flesh and blood, but only a spirit. This belief contained an internal contradiction it could not sustain, however:

If the crucifixion of Jesus was only an illusion, then, by the same token, the salvation wrought by Jesus’ cross must also be an illusion. . . . Docetism denied what the apostle Paul articulated as the single most important tenet of his Christian belief: ‘I decided to know nothing . . . except Jesus Christ and him crucified.’” (1 Corinthians 2:2) (p. 75)

The real-world corollary to religious docetism is political docetism, Hendricks (2006) argued, pointing out that the two forms of docetism create “a fantastic assumption we are to believe that Jesus only *seemed* to live in this world, that he only *seemed* to dwell in human society” [*italics original*] (p. 77). To do so truly denies Jesus’ own “best test.”



Hendricks (2006) provided extensive description and analysis of how the political activist Jesus was turned into the passive, otherworldly Jesus that readers of the Church's history will recognize and which Dostoevsky brutally satirized in the "Grand Inquisitor" chapter of his novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. But it is Hendricks' analysis of Jesus' words and actions that form the best parts of this relevant book. For example, his reading of the Scripture about not resisting evil and turning the other cheek saw Jesus "telling his poor and powerless hearers . . . how to exercise power even when they are overpowered" (p. 168). The backhanded slap implied in the Scripture was "not an attempt to do harm; it was an insult."

By taking an action, the powerless and the oppressed became more than victims; they became actors who asserted their *somebodyness*. By turning the other cheek they took back their dignity and refused to be defined by those in power. Instead, they defined themselves, and their self-definition was this: that they were not inferior beings, and they would not perpetuate that fiction by hanging their heads." [italics original] (p. 169)

This is the insight that Jesus gave to Gandhi and other passive resisters who have used self-definition to demonstrate to the oppressor the sameness and shared humanity of the oppressed; it is the insight that allowed Viktor Frankl to define the choice of one's own attitude in the face of horror and ontological degradation as the final freedom. This response, Hendricks pointed out, is a far cry from the meek Jesus, who is interpreted as having said that "the proper response to painful political realities is quietism, noninvolvement, and long-suffering" (p. 168).

Obery Hendricks (2006) has written an important book for servant-leaders. By delineating the social, economic, and political injustices that Jesus clearly was responding to, he clarified Jesus' "best test" in worldly rather than otherworldly terms. He concluded that Jesus' political ethics "can be encapsulated in this one animating principle: Treat the people and their needs as holy" (p. 320). The final third of the book analyzes recent American politics through this lens of basic humanity. In the "strange calculus of American political culture," Hendricks wrote, where "patriotism



has come to be virtually equated with Christianity” (p. 324), our self-professed Christian leaders egregiously fail the “best test” that Jesus laid before them as the world’s first example of servant-leadership.

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