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# Who is Jesus? New Monastic Perspectives

*Victoria Newman*

Any study of a Christian movement would be remiss if it did not address the very foundation of the Christian faith, Jesus the Christ. Driving the new monastic movement is an understanding of Jesus that differentiates itself from the modern Evangelical tendency to identify Jesus as a personal Savior, void of all political implications. New monasticism certainly embraces this aspect of Jesus, but not exclusively. They instead reexamine the Gospels with an eye for the social context of Jesus' life as well as paying particular attention to the actual words spoken by Jesus. A new Jesus emerges from this study, one that does demand that his followers be "born again"<sup>1</sup> but also instructs them to "sell all that you have and give it to the poor."<sup>2</sup> Embracing both of these directives, new monasticism continues to carve out its own unique location between secular social justice activists and right-wing Evangelicals.

The Christology of new monasticism is the launch pad for several of their most distinctive values, including active nonviolence, commitment to economic redistribution, and authentic discipleship. Their beliefs about Jesus stem from the provocative question: what if Jesus actually meant what he said? Approaching the recorded acts and words of Jesus with this question in mind has provided the new monasticism with a fresh outlook on what Christianity looks like in practice. This outlook deeply relies on the historical and sociopolitical context of Jesus rather than an easy acceptance of modern church practices. The reexamination of the New Testament, specifically the words of Jesus, as opposed to relying on the example of the mainstream church is the basis on which the new monasticism creates a picture of the Jesus that is central to their faith. This Jesus does not require any extrapolation or complex study, but rather leaps off the page, clearing declaring his social and theological message. This clarity is disarming in its abruptness, but new monasticism embraces such in their call to community, hospitality, generosity, and peace making.

This essay is structured in three parts; the first will be an overview of the first century world, paying particular attention to the political and religious climate, the second will put this historical study in contrast with modern American Christianity, and the third will explain in greater detail the influence of the teachings of Jesus as

<sup>1</sup> John 3:7

<sup>2</sup> Mark 10:21

inspiration for new monastic practice. The society where Jesus was born, where he preached, and where he was executed is a direct concern when studying the purpose and preaching of Jesus. He knew his audience; the images he used in his teachings and people with whom he shared life reflected various aspects of the political and religious establishment of the day. In the modern church, many times the life of Jesus is forgotten or skimmed over in order to focus exclusively on his death, resurrection, and atonement for sins. Forgetting his life and ministry, new monasticism argues, is to miss much of his purpose. In their examination of the biblical text with an understanding of its historical and social reality, new monastics have begun to envision a new kind of Christianity that sees the crucifixion of Jesus not only as a salvific act, but also as a political one.

### **A Refugee Born in the Middle of Genocide and an Executed Revolutionary**

The story of Jesus as it pertains to the people of God begins far before his birth. Extensive studies of the Old Testament have proven helpful in examining the New Testament, specifically in understanding the community of Judaism into which Jesus was born. Though there is not sufficient space to cover such studies in their fullness here, it is worthwhile to note that Christianity did not emerge naturally from Judaism under the leadership of Jesus--some scholars do not even believe that Jesus intended to form a new religious institution separate from Judaism.<sup>3</sup> Often, the Jews of the Bible are conceptualized as a unified and homogenous group, a label that is hard to accept as fact when considering that Herod the Great, Gamaliel the Pharisee, and Jesus could all be considered "Jews".<sup>4</sup> The group labeled as the Jews was far from unified, and this simple fact contributes a great deal to how Jesus is interpreted. Richard A. Horsley is one of many scholars who argue that the importance of Jesus can only be completely understood in light of the world he lived in. For the sake of simplicity, Horsley's book, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder*, will be examined almost exclusively in this study to demonstrate the realm of scholarship that attempts to shed light on the historical reality of the people of the Bible, including Jesus.

As many are aware, the Roman Empire was the prevailing order at the time of Jesus. Often romanticized as the pinnacle of Western civilization with its roads, education, and art, the Roman Empire was also known for its unstoppable, and often merciless, military power. They were imperial in nature, and they "thought it especially important to conquer unknown and exotic peoples, 'enemies' who

3 Douglas E. Oakman, *The Political Aims of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 17.

4 Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 9.

were far off and strange.”<sup>5</sup> In addition to their imperial streak, the Roman Empire was infamous for its creativity at disposing those with whom they disagreed, or perceived as a threat. “Circuses” involving lions and gladiators, public crucifixions, and systematic slaughter were all part of the Roman Empire’s attempts to “terrorize and control subject peoples.”<sup>6</sup> These tactics were effective. There were pockets of revolt, the Zealots being the most well known (Jesus even recruited some of his disciples from this militant rebel group), but on the whole the Roman Empire was unquestionably in control. This environment of instability, terror, and resistance paved the way for the birth of the Messiah, Jesus Christ; we paint with too broad a brush when we dismiss the society as merely “Jewish,” when it is clear that there was a more complex system of relationships and beliefs in place.

Jesus’ birth does not happen in a vacuum, but exists instead in the midst of the torture, conquering, killing, and complication of the Empire and its subsidiaries. The verses from the second chapter of Luke describing the circumstances of Jesus’ birth have become infamous: “In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken . . .” but many Christians, including new monastics, take this familiar passage and attempt to distance it from the Christmas pageants and Hallmark cards it has been ascribed to. Horsley points out that the “real purpose” of the census is often ignored, referring to the Roman requirements for conquered people to pay the Empire out of the family crops, and requiring them to relocate to agricultural and rural areas where there was likely no possibility of economic sustenance.<sup>7</sup> Rather than playing his part in the divine drama, Caesar Augustus was merely acting within his power as emperor to keep the people in their place, forcing them out of their homes and onto the margins of the Empire. Jesus’ family of birth was on the fringes of society, migrating not by choice, but by force.

In a similar vein of scholarship, several new monastic writers focus on several specific words used in the narrative of Jesus’ birth and explain their imperial and culturally understood meaning, as well as the new meaning given to them by Jesus and the gospel writers. For example, “Christ” in Greek and “Messiah” in Hebrew were the titles given to the ruler, presumably affirmed by God and the people. In the Gospels, it refers to Jesus and his role as the divinely appointed ruler over and savior of Israel.<sup>8</sup> Proclaiming the newborn Jesus as the Messiah carried a great deal of political heft to first-century Jews, especially when considering that the people of God who had previously been liberated from slavery in Egypt had

5 Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 21.

6 *Ibid.*, 29.

7 *Ibid.*, 12.

8 Shane Claiborne and Chris Haw, *Jesus for President: Politics for Ordinary Radicals* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 67.

been living under imperial occupation for the better part of six hundred years by the time Jesus was born.<sup>9</sup> This was a message of hope, and it was tangible; a new leader had been born, one that would shepherd and deliver the people from their oppressors--a message that new monasticism argues is largely lost in the modern commercialized Christmas celebrations. Shepherds were among the first to know that Jesus, their king and hope, had been born. Shepherds were one of the lowest classes of people in society, often living with their sheep; therefore, they usually smelled like sheep. Such a group of unclean shepherds became the welcoming party for the Messiah, foreshadowing Jesus' tendency to align himself with the poor and marginalized.

In addition to the ruling Empire, Jesus' origins are of equal importance in terms of understanding the perceptions of some Christians, including new monastics, about how God works in the world, both then and now. Herod the Great, the ruler of the Empire at the time was warned of the birth of this new King and Savior. Perceiving the threat to his own power and leadership, he responded by ordering the execution of all males under the age of two. Jesus was on the Empire's blacklist from his birth, a remarkable accomplishment considering that he was born at the fringes of society. The threat to the imperial order was a King, but not one from a neighboring land with wealth and an army at his disposal. This new King was not born in a palace, or even in a middle-class suburb, but in a barn among the animals. His parents were warned in a dream about Herod's plot, and they fled to Egypt after the birth of their son. This is a story with which most Americans are familiar, but the brutal truth and gravity of the situation is often completely skipped over. Jesus was a refugee born in the middle of genocide.<sup>10</sup> It does not get much more marginal than that. These initial circumstances of Jesus' life are interpreted by new monastics as a sign of the way God works in the world among his people, and it is not through the rich or powerful. Some outside scholarship points to the role of women, a traditionally marginalized group, in the birth narrative. God interrupts the line of patriarchal, tribal fathers and instead sends his son to earth by means of a lowly virgin woman.<sup>11</sup> Far from a top-down approach, the incarnation of God was the foster son of a lower-class carpenter, not a prince or a politician. His birth was announced by angels to shepherds, the scum of society. The new monasticism does not underestimate this significance of Jesus' social and familial location. They find layers of political meaning in the life of Jesus before he preached.

9 Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 16.

10 Claiborne and Haw, *Jesus for President*, 81.

11 Kelly Brown Douglas, *Black Bodies and the Black Church*, 144.

The sociopolitical context of the Empire continues to be an important and often missing piece in grasping the message of Jesus in the gospels. Many of the place names in the New Testament are skimmed over, often regarded as nothing more than geographic markers. On the contrary, “[j]ust as we have all kinds of thoughts when we hear Rumsfeld or Capitol Hill or Obama or the Oval Office, names like Praetorium or Golgotha or Antipas or Pilate or the Decapolis were loaded with meaning in Jesus’ time.”<sup>12</sup> As briefly sketched above, the Roman Empire was one that was built largely on the backs and taxes of those it conquered. It remained an incredibly powerful Empire as long as it was able to keep its citizens obedient, which they did through various means of terror and oppression. There were many attempts from the people to overthrow the Empire and present an alternative vision, but none of these caught on. The Zealots were too militaristic, the Sicarii were too ideologically extreme, and the Essenes and Qumran were too exclusive in their retreat to the desert. Even movements that garnered popular support were shut down.<sup>13</sup> The Empire was simply too powerful. The people were waiting for a new leader with an alternative that stood a chance against the seemingly unstoppable prevailing order. When Jesus began to preach, he was disparaged by some because he was from Nazareth, a place that was often ignored by those in power.<sup>14</sup> The critics of the day saw Jesus of Nazareth as political pundits would see an uneducated person from the backwoods of Appalachia running for President of the United States today. The movement that sprang up under Jesus’ teachings is all the more remarkable when the political climate and social location of Jesus are examined.

The actual ministry--both words and deeds--of Jesus is under special scrutiny, as his words in the gospels are of utmost importance to the new monasticism as they discern the importance of Jesus, both politically and theologically. A movement that predates the new monasticism but has had a large impact in shaping its development in terms of how it sees Jesus is the *Red Letter Christian* movement. The movement’s website states that its mission is to “take Jesus seriously by endeavoring to live out His radical, counter-cultural teachings as set forth in Scripture, and especially embracing the lifestyle prescribed in the Sermon on the Mount.”<sup>15</sup> The website was created after the publication of the identically-titled book *Red Letter Christians*, authored by Tony Campolo. Campolo, professor emeritus at Eastern University in Pennsylvania, taught several new monastic

12 Ibid, 72.

13 Ibid, 74-76.

14 John 1:46.

15 “Start Here,” *Red Letter Christians*, accessed July 2013, <http://www.redletterchristians.org/start/>

leaders, such as Shane Claiborne and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove. In the book, Campolo establishes the preeminence of the “red letters” of the Bible—that is, the quoted words of Jesus that are often printed in red—and then evaluates many social and political issues through the lens provided by the words (and actions) of Jesus. This will come into play later, when the modern Evangelical church and its understanding of Jesus is explained. For now, it is enough to note that the entire Red Letter Christian movement is founded on a reexamination of Jesus and his attributed words, not commentaries, theologies, or church traditions.

It was no secret to the people of his time that Jesus was countercultural, even subversive. Many of his speeches and teachings center on the “kingdom of God”, which in and of itself was threatening to the prevailing order of the empire, because “Jesus spoke of a throne, and Herod wasn’t on it.”<sup>16</sup> Proclaiming that Jesus was Lord carried the implicit reality that Caesar was not. In Matthew’s account of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “Blessed are the peacemakers,”<sup>17</sup> and in Luke’s parallel account of the Sermon on the Plain, he says, “Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.”<sup>18</sup> Both of these statements ran counter to the prevailing order of the day, which included an empire built on military conquest and a power structure that was controlled by the wealthy, not unlike the American culture of a strong military and capitalist enterprise. Even if the political and social teachings of Jesus are ignored, as new monastics claim they are, his theological teachings are enough to cause a stir. The “woes to the Pharisees” (Luke 11:37-54, Matthew 23:1-39, and Mark 12:35-40) are some of the most pointed and direct criticisms that Jesus spoke, and they are leveled at the religious establishment which was often hypocritical and legalistic, contrary to the God they supposedly represented. The Pharisees and high priests were often political appointees, and therefore on Rome’s payroll. This connects Jesus’ religious criticisms to the larger order. Most Christians are familiar with the temple cleansing, (Matthew 21:12-17, 21:23-27, Mark 11:15-19, 11:27-33, Luke 19:45-48, 20:1-8 and John 2:13-16) which describes Jesus’ most physical act of resistance. This act carries economic and political significance, overlapping with the criticism of the religious establishment, ultimately highlighting the reality of a Jesus who was concerned with more than just theology.

Additionally, the instructions given in Matthew 5:38-42, the “turn the other cheek” verses, are understood as extremely countercultural when seen in context. In the turning the other cheek example, it was understood in the Jewish culture of

16 Ibid, 88.

17 Matthew 5:9

18 Luke 6:20

the day that hitting another person was only done with the right hand. The sort of slap Jesus describes in the verses is understood as a backhand, one delivered in order to degrade. Turning your cheek to the person who had hit you required him to look you in the eye, “making it increasingly harder for that person to hurt you.”<sup>19</sup> If sued for the coat off your back, Jesus tells his followers to give up all of their clothes, “exposing the sickness of their greed . . . the shame fell less on the naked party and more on the person who looked on or caused the nakedness.”<sup>20</sup> This sort of court case would typically happen to a poor person, who likely owned only the set of clothes they were wearing. Stripping naked and discarding the only clothes one owned required faith that new clothes would be provided by the community, but more importantly, the act exposed a weakness in the economic system of greed. Clothes can be taken, but identity and dignity cannot. Finally, Jesus tells his followers to walk two miles when they are asked to walk one. In the first century, this would happen when soldiers were passing through town with heavy packs. Roman law stipulated that peasants could be made to carry the packs for one mile only; by insisting on going another mile, Jesus was subverting military law and likely encouraging the small talk that builds relationships between people groups that were typically considered enemies. The common denominator in these three teachings is the value of life and relationships. In rejecting the authority of violence, greed, and division, Jesus promotes a new authority of peace, justice and love. His teachings are much more political and subversive than the modern church has tended to imagine them, which is exactly the point new monasticism is attempting to make as they read the gospels anew, trying to rediscover and reclaim Jesus and his mission.

### “Who do they say that I am?”

Whenever the word evangelical is used these days, a stereotype comes to mind . . . Christians who are anti-gay, anti-feminist, anti-environmentalist, pro-war, pro-capital punishment, and conservative Republican. There are many of us, however, who are theologically evangelical, but who defy that image.<sup>21</sup>

In brief, this quote is what new monastics recognize as the reality, or at least the perception of the modern Evangelical church in America. Many of these perceived attributes of the average, mainstream Evangelical do not line up with the

19 Ibid, 92-93.

20 Ibid, 93.

21 Claiborne and Campolo, *Red Letter Revolution: What if Jesus Really Meant What He Said?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson), xi.

attributes of Jesus identified by the words and acts of Jesus in the previous section. Where does the discrepancy come from? New monastics argue that the person of Jesus has been misunderstood and misrepresented, and that has led to an American civil religion, or rather “Christendom, the historical monolith that assumes church/Christianity and Western culture are basically one entity, that church membership and citizenship constitute the same circle.”<sup>22</sup> Christendom was born when Constantine converted to Christianity in the fourth century, and made Christianity the state religion, “baptizing” the empire. The followers of Jesus were no longer “peculiar, marginalized, and suffering,” but “popular, credible, triumphal, and powerful.”<sup>23</sup> Claiborne and Haw refer to this moment as part of the “fall” of the church, and it has led to what has become the mainstream Evangelicalism that new monastics are trying to distance themselves from.

The political clout of Jesus’ words and actions is largely lost on a modern audience, Christian and secular alike. It is not considered contradictory to worship Jesus as the Son of God while also affirming the President of the United States, whereas in the first century, saying “Jesus is my Lord” also carried the meaning, “Caesar is not.” A modern take on this might be to refer to Jesus as the Commander in Chief, or President, which is part of the idea behind Shane Claiborne and Chris Haw’s book, *Jesus for President*. After the baptism of the state, Jesus became less of a rebellious political and religious figure that he would have likely been known as during his own time. Now he has been compartmentalized, understood only as a “personal Savior” to many American Evangelicals, not a social activist or revolutionary. Christianity, then, becomes just one aspect of life, and not an entire worldview that tints every aspect of life. “The United States is Christian inasmuch as it looks like Christ,”<sup>24</sup> but it is hard to affirm that Jerry Falwell was emulating Christ when he infamously blamed the September 11th attacks on groups such as feminists and the ACLU, or when George W. Bush claimed that bombing Iraq was the will of God. It is not too far-fetched to say that practices of some Evangelicals are based on something other than the Jesus who is described in the gospels.

Perceiving a similar trend in perceptions of who Jesus was, Horsley remarks that Jesus has “been reduced to a merely religious figure.”<sup>25</sup> He argues that the “depoliticization” of Jesus, Judea, Galilee, and the Roman Empire have all contributed to the “domestication” of Jesus and his ministry and activism. Of the

22 David Janzen, *The Intentional Christian Community Handbook: For Idealists, Hypocrites, and Wannabe Disciples of Jesus* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press), 35.

23 Claiborne and Haw, *Jesus for President*, 165.

24 *Ibid.*, 174.

25 Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 6.

factors constructing these depoliticized images, the modern Western assumption that religion is separate from politics and economics is at the top of the list.<sup>26</sup> In actuality, it is extremely difficult, perhaps even impossible to separate religion from other spheres of society; in America, there are references to Christianity everywhere, from “In God We Trust” on our money to “God Bless Our Troops” on our bumper stickers. A second factor is Western individualism, which is at the heart of American ideology. The foundational belief in a society of independent individuals has influenced studies of Jesus, reducing him to a “religious teacher who uttered isolated sayings and parables relevant only to individual persons.”<sup>27</sup> As for the Roman Empire, it is viewed by many Christians as a positive entity for the early growth of Christianity, because it had connected most of the world with its roads and maintained the public order with its rule, preparing the way for the post-Easter followers of Jesus, such as Paul. Horsley argues that believing that the Roman Empire was a conduit for the innocuous Christianity is to miss the reality of the situation.<sup>28</sup> Jesus was arrested and executed by the state; Paul and others were constantly imprisoned, tortured, and even killed for professing the kingship of Jesus. By these biblically-documented occurrences<sup>29</sup>, it is possible to conclude that the Roman Empire was less than indifferent to the professions of a Savior and King other than their own, Caesar. Christians and secular academics alike have tended to accept these images of a depoliticized Jesus and first-century world that he inhabited. Disregarding the historical and sociopolitical context has allowed many to distance themselves from what new monastics and others perceive as the true message of Jesus.

What has and is happening in American Christianity can be referred to as an identity crisis. Jesus is no longer perceived or understood as he was during his lifetime; therefore, his teachings do not carry the same meaning. As the state began to claim Christianity, the original message was tamed, adapted, and distorted to fit the agenda of the state, rather than adapting the practices of the state to the way of Jesus. The new monastics plaintively question: “Who needs a Savior when we have a four hundred billion dollar defense shield? Who needs a Deliverer when the empire has become a democracy? Who needs a God when we are worthy of worship ourselves?”<sup>30</sup> The need for Jesus as a figure for social justice and radical acts of servant leadership has been eliminated by a church complacent to live in the enculturation of society. Jesus has become characterized as an intensely per-

26 Ibid, 6.

27 Ibid, 7.

28 Ibid, 12.

29 See Acts 7, 12, 18, and 19 among others.

30 Claiborne and Haw, *Jesus for President*, 170.

sonal figure, one with which each Christian shares a personal relationship. His death on the cross is understood as an act of atonement for your sins, satisfying the wrath of God so that you might have a one-on-one relationship with him. New monasticism affirms this biblical truth, but affirms the equally true reality that Jesus was executed by the state as a political and religious revolutionary. Yes, he was crucified because it was the will of God, and because he chose to be for the sake of mankind. However, he was also crucified because the state and the religious establishment wanted him dead.

Part of the mainstream Evangelical understanding of Jesus comes from the way the Bible is read, as Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove writes, Evangelicals are using the Bible as an instruction manual to the wrong game.<sup>31</sup> The game most Evangelicals use the Bible for is "Make Myself". This game insists that all of the stories in the Bible can be reduced to principles or instructions for individual believers on how to better themselves. Jesus enters this game in order to help coach Christians along: "To be all that I can be, I need Jesus. But in this game called Make Myself, the Bible is all about what Jesus wants me to do to make myself what I ought to be."<sup>32</sup> A variant of this game is "Make Yourself" in which the Bible and the words of Jesus become tools of proselytizing and judgment. If Evangelicals are playing this game, it is not hard to see why Christians are so often characterized as judgmental and hypocritical. Wilson-Hartgrove goes on to argue that the game the Bible was meant to explain was "God Makes a People,"<sup>33</sup> rejecting the exclusive focus on the individual and personal relationship with Jesus and instead opting for a community centered understanding of God. This game is obvious in the Old Testament, as it chronicles the struggles, sins, and journey of God's people. Then Jesus comes onto the stage in the New Testament, and many people assume that he is the Plan B. Plan A was community centered, but it did not work, so here is another option focusing instead on individual spirituality and salvation. Wilson-Hartgrove refutes the idea of a Plan B, pointing instead to Jesus' many references of the Old Testament scriptures, his tendency to preach to large crowds rather than individuals, and his own community of disciples.<sup>34</sup> Simply put, new monasticism criticizes the individualization and compartmentalization of Jesus in mainstream Evangelical faith. By making him strictly into a figure of personal salvation alone, he is stripped of all political and social activist roles, and Christians are free from having to act in those roles as well. New monastics reject this distance, and in-

31 Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *New Monasticism: What it Has to Say to Today's Church*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press), 59.

32 *Ibid.*, 59.

33 *Ibid.*, 60.

34 *Ibid.*, 67-68.

stead opt for the more challenging path, engaging with Jesus' teachings in ways that are as radical today as they were in the first century.

### The Great Commission

What does all of this biblical scholarship and criticism of mainstream Evangelicals mean for the new monasticism in practice? Their vision of Jesus does much to inform their perspectives on issues such as nonviolence, economics, and discipleship. They even understand their call to communal living as a lifestyle encouraged by Jesus. Rejecting the tendency of most of the Evangelical church to reduce Jesus to a personal Savior, new monastics constantly affirm his role as social activist, political revolutionary, and enemy of the state. The personal Jesus and the political Jesus are not mutually exclusive--the personal is political. Opening the door of political and social justice activism is a definitive move that cannot be undone. Their choice to see Jesus actively defying the injustices of his day implicates them in parallel action today.

In contrast to Western individualism, new monasticism embraces its most fundamental principle-- life in community. While Jesus may not have directly delineated the type of community and life that is being actualized in the new monasticism, there are aspects of his life and teaching that have been foundational for its development. In his own ministry, Jesus lived with his disciples; every aspect of life from food to worship to fellowship was shared in community. He calls his disciples his friends (John 15:15), indicating a close relationship. New monastics embrace life together, sharing meals, bills, living space, and cars with their fellow community members, in an attempt to build deeper and more authentic relationships with one another. Before Jesus leaves his disciples, he gives them what is known as the "Great Commission" (Matthew 28:16-20), in which he tells them to go and make disciples of all the nations. He uses the same word that has been used to define the group of people who have been alongside him. Often, many churches use these Bible verses as a banner for evangelism and mission work, which new monastics argue is less than a full realization of Jesus' command. A disciple is a follower; when Jesus called James and John, it is written that they immediately dropped what they were doing and *followed* him.<sup>35</sup> American Christians are far more likely to use the term "believer" to identify themselves, a trend that Shane Claiborne finds inconsistent with the teachings of Jesus. He writes of the Great Commission: "Jesus did not send us into the world to make believers but to make disciples. We can believe in him and still not follow him."<sup>36</sup> "Follower"

<sup>35</sup> Matthew 4:20.

<sup>36</sup> Claiborne and Campolo, *Red Letter Revolution*, 9.

is a much more challenging word than “believer”; it demands action, not passivity. New monasticism embraces this term, and is oriented around a new set of practices to show that they not only believe, but also follow.

An image of Jesus that is most often swept aside by the Religious Right and others is his preference for peace and nonviolence. New monastics take issue with the fact that American Christians claim to believe in a God who was called the Prince of Peace,<sup>37</sup> but will wholeheartedly support the American military. There is clearly a disconnect here, and it seems clear that Jesus does not carry very much weight outside the realm of personal spirituality. Jesus’ nonviolence is not to be mistaken with passivity, as new monastics claim a “third way,” a means of responding to violence in a creative way “that is neither submission nor assault.”<sup>38</sup> As in their understanding of the “turn the other cheek” verses, Christians are not to retaliate by hitting back, but neither are they to let their attacker walk all over them. Instead, they are to turn their cheek, making eye contact with their oppressor, forcing him to recognize their mutual humanity, and making it more difficult to strike again. The parable Jesus tells in Matthew 13:24-30 about the weeds and the wheat being allowed to grow together until harvest is used by new monastics as answering the question: “How do we rid the world of evil?” a question many American Christians are trying to answer with bombs and drone strikes. They derive two main points from this parable: 1.) it is sometimes difficult to tell the weeds from the wheat; it is not always as clear as “us” and “them” and 2.) destroying evil could also mean destroying good.<sup>39</sup> They see Jesus as a figure who “reached out to the occupiers and the occupied . . . Jesus not only cared for the poor, he cared for the powerful Roman centurion.”<sup>40</sup> In a likewise manner, new monastics are staunchly pacifist, and actively engaged with nonviolence movements, such as Christian Peacemaker Teams. Some of the new monastics even traveled with these teams to Baghdad shortly after the United States began its occupation of Iraq.<sup>41</sup> The new monasticism’s embrace of nonviolence comes from their understanding of Jesus uncompromisingly as the Prince of Peace.

Another aspect of new monasticism that is of great scope and importance with regards to the teachings of Jesus is economic practice. This subject receives a more thorough and developed analysis in its own essay, but here it is worthwhile to note that many of the alternative economic practices of new monastic communities are rooted in Jesus’ actions or teachings. Jesus was known to constantly

37 Isaiah 9:6.

38 Claiborne and Haw, *Jesus for President*, 94.

39 *Ibid.*, 97.

40 *Ibid.*, 98.

41 Wilson-Hartgrove, *New Monasticism*, 35.

engage in meaningful ways with women, tax collectors, lepers, and other poor or marginalized people, which was far from the norm for a society governed by a stringent hierarchy and relational norms. In a similar way, new monastics embrace those that our modern society tends to spurn, pursuing justice for the urban poor, war refugees, and the imprisoned, among many others. One of the twelve marks of the new monasticism is “Relocation to Abandoned Places of Empire,” which cites (among other examples) Jesus’ forty days in the desert on the geographic fringes of the world he knew.<sup>42</sup> New monastic communities more often than not are formed in the middle of dense urban areas, often with high crime or drug-use rates. This is how they interpret and adapt Jesus’ example to a modern context; they are living with the people to whom they hope to minister. By achieving solidarity with the poor, new monastics hope to equally reject the pervasive greed and corruption of American capitalism as well as the complacency and distance of the mainstream church.

One of Jesus’ most famous stories is that of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). While usually reduced to a lesson in being kind and helpful to anyone, even strangers, the original story is rich with details that point to a larger criticism about cultural prejudice and hospitality to foreigners. The man in the story is robbed, beaten, and left for dead. As he is lying in the ditch, he is passed by by both a priest and a Levite (religious elite). Then a Samaritan comes along and helps the man, though he does not know him. For Jesus’ audience, this must have been tough to swallow; Samaritans were culturally and socially undesirable by first-century Jews. They were not seen in a positive light, which is what makes Jesus’ story that much more shocking. The most religious people in the society did not help a fellow Jew, but a *Samaritan* did? Perhaps the listeners should reevaluate their cultural stereotypes and, if the time came, help a Samaritan in need. New monastics are well-aware of the current political issue of immigration in America, and cite Old Testament passages about welcoming the alien and foreigner, as well as Jesus’ teachings on the good Samaritan in regards to how modern believers should approach immigration. New monastics do not embrace a nationalistic perspective, but instead acknowledge a transcendent citizenship in the kingdom of God. Seeing others as brothers and sisters in Christ first breaks down the barrier between “us” and “them,” helping to ultimately envision a new community aligned with the teachings of Jesus. In addition to these large-scale ideas, hospitality is practiced on a localized scale as well. Hospitality to the stranger is the

42 Sr. Margaret M. McKenna, “Mark 1: Relocation to Abandoned Places of Empire” in *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, ed. Rutba House (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock), 14..

third mark of the new monasticism.<sup>43</sup> Welcoming in people off the street in their neighborhood to share a meal is one of the simplest and most common ways this hospitality is actualized, but there are more extreme examples, such as adopting children orphaned by gang violence, welcoming in recovering drug addicts, and others who need a place to live, reconcile, and recover. Hospitality and other practices of the new monasticism require more than vague awareness or simple charity. Instead, they call for something more direct and challenging, something that Jesus practiced himself-- leading by serving.

### **Conclusion: Servant Leadership, Prophetic Witness, and the Modern Church**

In his lifetime, Jesus did not begin a new religion or establish a new church. He thoroughly critiqued the corruption of the religious establishment of his day, but still embraced the tradition by celebrating Passover and reading the Scriptures and laws. New monasticism parallels this decision to remain embedded in the institutions of today rather than divorcing them and starting a new faith tradition. Certainly, some aspects of Jesus' teachings and new monastic practice are very different from their respective mainstream realities, but they are done within a certain frame of reference. For Jesus, it was temple Judaism, and for new monastics, it is the American Christian church. Both Jesus and new monasticism aim to offer a prophetic witness to the people of their time, envisioning a new way to live and share faith while simultaneously ingraining themselves in the existing systems. This prophetic witness is dependent upon the notion of servant leadership, leading by an example of service to others. Servant leadership is part of a larger umbrella of political subversion, an umbrella that both Jesus and new monastics are under. Jesus was politically engaged, but on his own terms, seeking ways to effect change that are subtler than would be expected from a revolutionary. New monasticism follows this example, embedding itself in the political and religious order of today and changing it in unexpected ways.

When the disciples continue to ask Jesus how to be the greatest and most powerful in his new kingdom, he answers that they should enter the kingdom as servants and not as kings, just as he has entered the world "not to be served, but to serve."<sup>44</sup> Claiborne and Haw rephrase this passage in blunt terms: "If [the disciples] wanted to rule in his kingdom, they'd better be ready to wash feet and clean toilets."<sup>45</sup> Jesus recognized that meaningful change was effected from below

43 Maria Russel Kennedy, "Mark 3: Hospitality to the Stranger" in *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, ed. Rutba House (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock), 39.

44 Matthew 20:20-28.

45 Claiborne and Haw, *Jesus for President*, 123.

and not from positions of power, which might explain why he was more often in the company of prostitutes and lepers than princes and high priests. One can tell much about the character of Jesus by whom he spends the majority of his time with. Of the twelve disciples closest to him, most were common workmen, some were Zealot revolutionaries, and some were tax collectors; none had political or religious clout. Jesus aligns himself with those at the bottom of the social hierarchy in order to serve them, hardly a shrewd tactic of a political leader in the first century or today. New monastics also embrace lives of service as a means to effect change, rejecting individualism and material wealth for the sake of community and generosity. Living communally in areas of urban poverty and gang violence may seem irrational or downright insensible in our contemporary society, but it is aligned with the servant leadership exhibited by Jesus. Choosing downward mobility over individual advancement, new monastics establish solidarity with those they wish to serve with the love of God. The means of bringing the kingdom of heaven to earth may seem paradoxical, or as Claiborne and Haw put it: "This king rules with a towel, not a sword. In the kingdom of God, we descend into greatness."<sup>46</sup>

In addition to servant leadership, Jesus engaged politically, but with a caveat. His activity and prophetic witness was certainly political, but not in the way the Empire was used to doing politics. Jesus made it clear that he was setting himself and his followers apart from the world and politics of Caesar, an aspect of the church that has been largely lost in modern America. The first Christians were "a group of people that embodied a new way of living, the way out of empire . . . They were to become the salt and light of the world."<sup>47</sup> The challenge of this command is to remain *in* the world without being *of* the world, a tension maintained effectively by Jesus and less so by some of his followers today. While deeply embedded in the reality of the prevailing order, he rejected it and presented an alternative that looked very different. The way in which he rejected the dominant order and presented the alternative was done in indirect and subversive ways. Jesus did not attempt to change the political world by dethroning Caesar or instigating a coup. Jesus never waved a flag or a fist in the air, "but if Jesus ever had a fist in the air, it had blood on the wrist."<sup>48</sup> New monastics are attempting to be such a group of people today. New monastics are engaging politically, but not on the system's terms. Shane Claiborne may not be running for President of the United States, but he and other new monastics are remaining socially and politically active in more

46 Ibid, 122.

47 Ibid, 137.

48 Ibid, 298.

indirect ways, such as feeding the homeless in their community or practicing an alternative economy. New monasticism may be a revolution, though a revolution of a very unusual sort.

Servant leadership and a subversive political engagement are both aspects of Jesus' prophetic witness to the church in his time. Today, new monastics affirm the presence of the church in the Christian life, and offer a similar prophetic witness, rather than establishing a new institution entirely. New monasticism is not parachurch; it's prochurch.<sup>49</sup> In Jesus' time, he clearly told his followers that he did not intend to "abolish the law, but to fulfill it."<sup>50</sup> His most physical and extreme act, flipping tables and pushing out the moneychangers happened in the temple, and Jesus called it "my house,"<sup>51</sup> maintaining a connection to it rather than abandoning it completely. Drawing on the example of Jesus' life, new monastics do not consider themselves missionaries to the poor--they are the poor--but rather, missionaries to the church.<sup>52</sup> In affirming church ties, new monasticism is doing what many movements prior to it have not, and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove points out that this may in fact be the "new" of new monasticism.<sup>53</sup> The new monasticism, through its many practices including servant leadership and political engagement, offers a prophetic witness to the church, reimagining what Christianity looks like in our modern context. New monastics are members of various Christian denominations--Catholics, Baptists, Pentecostals, Mennonites--and they do not necessarily abandon their faith traditions when they become a part of this movement. Despite this reality, new monastics are not splitting themselves along denominational lines as other Christians might; they affirm the best parts of their tradition and critique the worst. In doing so, they are able to maintain a connection to the already established body of the church with the hopes of possibly drawing various churches into the Church. "Jesus is coming back, and he's coming back for a bride, not a harem"<sup>54</sup> is a phrase that appears several times throughout new monastic writings, affirming the desire to continue to work with the church and not against it. Their ideas may seem radical, but they are not trying to overthrow anyone, much less the church. With this in mind, prophetic witness is a better name than revolution for what new monasticism is up to in the modern church.

Jesus was often causing trouble, but some of his most interesting practices even by today's standards are his servant leadership and subversive politics. Both

49 Claiborne and Campolo, *Red Letter Revolution*, 23.

50 Matthew 5:17.

51 Luke 19:46.

52 Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 144.

53 Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *New Monasticism: What It Has to Say to Today's Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press), 141.

54 Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution*, 145.

of these traits influence new monasticism, and they try to live them out in a modern context. New monastics live in contrast to the religious establishment and the political order while still remaining deeply entrenched in them, paralleling an image of Jesus who did just that in the first century. In his own time, he preached of an alternative way of living, a new kingdom governed by a ruler quite unlike Caesar. The theological and political convictions of Jesus were united, and it is this volatile combination that has made him such a compelling figure of scholarship and worship. New monasticism situates itself in the union of the theological and the political, the individual and the community. By reexamining the world of Jesus and reclaiming his position in it, new monasticism has discovered a figure that is revolutionary, but in a new way. He does not abandon the society or church of his time and start living a new kingdom. New monasticism believes that today he would not run for President, although some Evangelicals might disagree on that. The new monastics of today emulate the servant leadership and political engagement of Jesus, but not in a way that is destructive of the modern church. Instead, Jesus and new monasticism offer a prophetic witness to the church, seeking not to replace the church but to reawaken it.

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