

THE TEACHING OF JESUS Norman Anderson

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THE HARD SAYINGS OF JESUS F.F. Bruce

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In the seventies, Michael Green edited the 'I Believe' series. His aim in this new series, 'The Jesus Library', is to foster the production of something similar in the eighties: books written by competent scholars who nevertheless know how to communicate their findings in straightforward prose and a minimum of esoteric footnotes. But whereas the first series was devoted to areas of Christian teaching often neglected or rejected in scholarly writing, this new series focuses more narrowly on various controversial aspects of the life and teaching of Jesus.

Sir Norman devotes the first chapter of his book to a brief examination of how the gospels came into being, and of the authenticity of the record they provide of the teaching of Jesus. As might be expected, the approach is conservative but not combative, elementary but not naive. Of interest to both layman and NT specialist are the comparisons and contrasts Sir Norman draws between the gospel records on the one hand and the *Qu'ran* and *Sunna* on the other, with respect to the descent of their respective traditions. These are deft and full of insight.

The rest of the book is organized around the theme of the kingdom of God. Two chapters are devoted to 'The Summons of the Kingdom', three to 'The Ethics of the Kingdom', and two to 'The Consummation of the Kingdom'. A book that aims to deliver so much lays itself open to numerous criticisms. Specialists will quibble over many details (e.g., Are there really only seven parables in Matt. 13, or are there eight? Has Sir Norman rightly handled, say, Matt. 11:12?); but the criticisms would be largely unfair, for in most disputed matters Sir Norman expresses himself cautiously but firmly, and without resorting to the detailed weighing of opinions that would transform this book into something else. Perhaps a more serious difficulty is the selection of the kingdom as the exclusive organizing principle. Except for a few pages in chapter 3, the fourth gospel consequently receives very short shrift, and useful distinctions are sometimes flattened. Nevertheless, the book largely achieves its aims, and can be confidently placed in the hands of readers who want a responsible survey of Jesus' teaching.

The second book invites comparison with William Neil's *The Difficult Sayings of Jesus* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1975, published in England under the title *What Jesus Really Meant*), and the more recent book jointly written by W. Neil and S. Travis, *More Difficult Sayings of Jesus* (Mowbray, London 1981). The former sought to explain thirty-four gospel texts, the latter thirty-one. Here Professor Bruce sets forth succinct expositions of no fewer than seventy. With one exception (viz. John 6:53, whence the title), all are drawn from the synoptic gospels.

Professor Bruce wisely points out that Jesus' sayings can be 'hard' in two quite different ways. Some are hard to understand; others are easy to understand, but hard to take because they call in question our cherished prejudices. The first kind of 'hard saying' needs explanation. Here Professor Bruce's vast learning, lightly worn, leads through scores of thickets to

sensible conclusions, simply stated. By and large he avoids questions of source criticism and authenticity, and expounds the texts in their canonical settings, though on occasion he compares two forms of a saying and seeks to reconstruct an original (e.g., Matt. 11:12 = Luke 16:16, pp.115-18). Doubtless in a few cases some will take leave to hold to another interpretation (e.g., I am unpersuaded by his explanation of Luke 7:28 = Matt. 11:11).

In the second kind of hard saying, the expositor must be careful not to explain it away, but to make the reader feel its weight. Professor Bruce succeeds admirably (see his comments on 'Love your enemies' or 'You must be perfect'), often with very apposite allusions to a wide range of authors. Only rarely does a suspicion arise that this kind of hard saying has been made too easy (e.g. pp.56-62).

Subsequent printing would do well to include the Scripture references in the table of contents.

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