

The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is

N.T. Wright

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Was Jesus God? Was Jesus the promised, long-awaited Messiah? How did he view “the Kingdom of God?” Does the resurrection matter, and if it does, what did it mean to the people of Jesus’ time? How did Jesus view himself?

“Christianity has always said, with John 1:18, that nobody has ever seen God but that Jesus has revealed God. We shall only discover whom the true and living God actually is if we take the risk of looking at Jesus himself. That is why the contemporary debates about Jesus are so important; they are also debates about God himself.” This is the first reason historian Wright gives for his serious historical study of Jesus.

The first four chapters of the book present the beliefs and historical setting in which Jesus lived and during which period of time the Christian Gospels were written. The last four chapters are practical applications and implications of the ideas presented earlier. Wright offers precise historical evidence for the prevailing viewpoints held by the religious authorities and political leaders of Jesus’ time and what the overarching purpose and mission of Jesus were. He also challenges us to think about these as Jesus’ vocation: why he set about doing what he did, and what he believed would be the consequences of those actions.

The chapters are heavy with historical data and information that respond to and critique the information of the Jesus Seminar and John Dominic Crossan (as well as others) in their published works about their respective studies of Jesus. Wright, however, proposes that many of the battles being fought today are out of step with the reality of our present world. Theological wars, arguments over whether or not Jesus was divine or human, whether or not the Gospels are reliable and a host of other subjects simply have been moved into a different sphere by the study of first-century Judaism and Christianity in particular. “There are new battles not totally different, of course, from the old ones but with significant new elements.”

The Challenge of Jesus brings the reader to an understanding of Jesus’ vocation in this world and to a recognition that the Gospels are not just a story. The story is a play in which the part of Jesus is supposed to be played by the readers.

As the light of the world, as the kingdom of God on earth, the Christian will stop focusing on nonessentials and begin to live in the world with a new understanding of purpose, calling and consequence.

Wright has given those who have a concern for the future of Christianity in the post postmodern setting a tremendous challenge looking, in an almost entirely new framework, at the life of Jesus and what he was truly about when he “walked among us,” and what that means for those who call themselves his followers.

LINDA WILSON (January / February 2000)

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