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JAMES FRANKLIN

IS JENSENISM COMPATIBLE WITH CHRISTIANITY?

A RECENT BIOGRAPHY of Marcus Loane, evangelical Anglican Archbishop of Sydney in the 1960s, records that as a student at Moore Theological College he would read during lectures to avoid having to listen to the liberal Principal. When you are committed to a closed system of thought, you can't be too careful when it comes to letting ideas in from the outside. But what about the ideas already inside? How does the Sydney Anglican interpretation of Christianity compare to what Jesus said?

Sydney's Archbishop Peter Jensen and Dean Phillip Jensen are the public face of a proudly "narrow" interpretation of the Bible that has had an immense success in the English-speaking world in the last quarter of Christianity's history. The basic tenets of "Bible-based" faith are clear. They are summarised in what Peter Jensen calls the "great alones" of the Reformation: scripture alone, Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone.

The point of the word *alone* is what it excludes: there is no role for good works as opposed to faith, for human effort in addition to God's help, for the insights of other faiths as well as Christ, for the tradition of the church as well as the written word of scripture. "Faith alone" means exactly what it says: what God wants is belief in certain propositions about Jesus and salvation, and without that belief good actions are not pleasing to God. In fact, they deserve his punishment. "The final sin of religious people," Peter Jensen writes, "is moralism, by which we trust that we can come to know the living God and to gain his approval by the quality of our lives." He condemns "any religious system which involves even a modicum of human merit". That means, in plain terms, that Jensenites believe God disapproves of the ordinary person's virtue for the same reason he disapproves of Mother Teresa's charity—it is not badged by them.

There are many objections that spring to mind—is that not a narrow view, intolerant, prejudicial to the

good health of society? Jensenites rejoice in those criticisms—the best persecution going, they think, in our sadly lion-free age. But what will immediately strike anyone who has read even casually in the Bible is how grossly it is out of tune with the Jesus of the gospels. The big statements of Jesus' message that the gospels themselves foreground, like the Sermon on the Mount and the story of the Good Samaritan, are all about God's concern that humans should act rightly, with love and compassion. "Blessed are the peacemakers," says Jesus, not "Blessed are the staunch subscribers to Reformation formularies of doctrine". The very point of Jesus' choosing to illustrate care for one's neighbour by a Samaritan—by Jewish lights, one of woefully heretical beliefs—is to emphasise that God does love compassionate action irrespective of belief in doctrinal details.

In a key passage (Matthew 25) that so-called Bible-based Christianity has always been keen to downplay, Jesus discusses the principles on which God judges people: "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat ... I was in prison and you visited me." There is no mention of ritual observances, none of assent to propositions. That is not to say Jesus was unconcerned by doctrine—he was very eager to reveal that there is a God who cares for humans and wishes humans to have a relationship with him. But his emphasis was always on how that relationship plays out in action, not on details of doctrine or religious ceremonies. It is impossible to imagine him getting hot under the toga about doctrinal and liturgical trivia like stained glass or church choirs. What would Jesus have thought of a "Christianity" that plays up St Paul's statements in a minor letter about women in church, and hides in embarrassment the peaks of Jesus' own teaching?

Jensenism believes it has an answer to these criticisms in the words of St Paul on the importance of faith. In addition to the obvious incoherence of preferring a follower of Jesus to Jesus himself, Paul has a few choice remarks about those in his own day who

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said, "I am for Paul." The faith Paul spoke of, he makes clear, is not his own but refers back to Jesus. The extraordinarily low profile of the gospels in the writings of the Jensens—except for carefully selected snippets—is the clearest indication possible of what is really happening. They fear the gospels, for the gospel message is inconvenient.

FEAR OF THE PLAIN meaning of the gospels explains several other distortions in the Jensenite approach to the Bible. The Jensens are not strict biblical literalists. Phillip Jensen admits that Jesus' statement, "If anyone comes to me, and hates not his father and mother and wife and children, he cannot be my disciple", is an exaggeration. That is plainly right, since a literal interpretation of the text would be out of tune with the moral tone of the whole. Why then are the Jensens uniformly suspicious of historical and linguistic studies that might cast light on the meaning of the whole? It can only be a fear of what might be revealed about the gospel as it really is.

It also explains the evangelical practice of "Bible study", in taking a very tiny portion of text and embroidering obvious comments on it for an hour. Will the text for comment ever fall beneath the size of a sentence, as in the classic Tory political broadcast from the British comedy *Not the Nine O'Clock News*, "'tis easier for a rich man to pass through the eye of a needle, than for a camel to"? If one could give a single piece of advice to those who have fallen into the rut of this kind of "study", it would be: read the gospels less often, but in longer portions.

It explains too the Jensenite hostility to the other ("idolatrous") branches of Christianity. A fundamental contradiction in "Bible-based" Christianity is that the Bible itself does not say that Jesus left a book but a community. Yet evangelicals have cut themselves off

from the great body of Christian believers, Orthodox, Catholic and Coptic, the church to which Jesus promised his unending help. Evangelicals have created instead an inward-looking and recent sect, interested neither in understanding the Hebrew background of the Biblical text, nor in the person of Jesus, nor in the simplest "big picture" understanding of the gospel message. The real gospel does not make itself an object of worship, as in Peter Jensen's talk of "the gospel, by which men could be saved from the wrath due to their sins" (actually, he writes "saved for the wrath" but I am assured that is a Freudian typo). The slogan "scripture alone" is not just narrow, but self-contradictory.

The most unsavoury aspect of the Jensenites' distortion of the simple message of Jesus is its concentration on sin and guilt, without a compensating sense of human worth. The gospels are quite free of the extreme evangelical "heads I win, tails you lose" attitude to guilt, where everything I do wrong deserves God's wrath but anything I do right is done by him. The dark mindset of guilt alone is designed to prey on early teens and technically smart but socially unconfident older teens who, for one reason or another, have a shaky sense of self-worth. Missing is the sense, clear in the gospels, that God is only displeased when we have done some-

thing evil that we might not have done. Harming "little ones", the gospels record, was what made Jesus most angry.

As to Phillip Jensen's accusing the Archbishop of Canterbury of taking his salary under false pretences, there is no escaping the obvious applicability of Jesus' throwaway remark about noticing first the beam in one's own eye.

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