

Thirty years ago, when David Hoffman and I first broached the possibility of a theological journal for the United Church, few thought such an entity could be launched, and if it actually were they considered it would last at most a couple of years. Even those of us intimately involved were cautious about its impact or longevity. After 27 years of publication there are few issues in the life of our church that have not benefitted from the careful historical and theological exploration that *Touchstone* has provided. For this there are many who need our “thank you” but none more so than Mac and the Winnipeg connection. Well done, good and faithful ones!

Looking forward, *Touchstone* has a renewed sense of hope and urgency for the life of the church. An effective social and pastoral witness to the resurrection of Christ needs an engaged and committed theological and historical imagination. We are honoured to share this unfolding future with you, exploring the depths of our faith and the call of God to live faithfully.

— John Hogman, Chair, *Touchstone* Editorial Board

## **ALL AUTHORITY IN HEAVEN AND ON EARTH...**

One of the most beloved stories in the Gospels has very weak support in the ancient manuscripts. I’m referring to the account in John about the woman caught in adultery. In our current English Bibles this story appears in the first part of chapter 8. The footnote to these verses in the NRSV tells us that the most ancient manuscripts don’t carry the passage. It goes on to say that “other authorities [they mean here, I believe, not just later Gospel manuscripts, but also quotations attributed to Jesus in early Christian writings] add the passage here or after 7:36 or after 21:25 or after Luke 21:38, with variations of text; some mark the passage as doubtful.” The footnote on this passage in the Jerusalem Bible claims the narrator’s style is more like Luke’s than John’s.

In our kind of liberal Protestant circles we could care less about the ancient manuscripts; the words “Let the man without sin be the one to cast the first stone” are considered not only to be undisputably those of Jesus, but one of his most precious statements. My reason for referring to the story, and its lack of manuscript support, is to raise questions about the unstated rules that are often used in contemporary interpretations of the Gospels. As far as this passage is concerned, I personally believe it reflects an event that actually took place during Jesus’ ministry. Speaking strictly as a non-specialist in New Testament interpretation, I think it got left out of the earliest written accounts because it made many early Christians uneasy. The outrage over adultery in that period was intense, and in such a patriarchal environment it focussed much more on the woman than on the man. Thus this story was, as I see it, sufficiently troublesome for many that it didn’t make it into the earliest Gospel manuscripts. But the tenacity of the oral tradition in those times was amazing, and scholars tell us that for years after the written Gospels were available the oral tradition still took precedence. And the case of the woman taken in adultery was, it seems, one of the stories that remained in the oral tradition. It finally began to appear in the written form of the Gospels, sometimes here and sometimes there, but eventually always somewhere.

My experience is that many New Testament interpreters love that kind of thing, — that is, if they love the story itself. They see it as an authentic story triumphing over the prejudices of early Christians. Meanwhile, the stories they don’t love get a different treatment. Consider the final verses of Matthew’s Gospel. The risen Jesus says to his disciples, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the close of the age.” This is a passage many critics react against. Even though here the manuscript evidence is solid as a rock, they assume that the earliest Christians wanted Jesus to have said something like this so they put these alien words into his mouth.

It's true that everything we have in the Gospels is part of the evangelical testimony of the Gospel writers. At the end of the penultimate chapter of John's Gospel the writer indicates that, in assembling the stories in his book, his purpose has been to enable people to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. Clearly the same purpose motivated the other three Gospel writers; they are not neutral reporters.

Taking that into account, let's consider those final verses in Matthew. Are they inconsistent with what has appeared earlier in that Gospel? I would suggest that the claim about authority, at least, is saying much the same thing as is found a little earlier in Matthew, at chapter 25:31-46. In that section Jesus is quoted as referring to the time when the "Son of Man" will come in his glory, sit on his glorious throne, and all the nations will stand before him. The Son of Man? In the May 2009 issue of the *United Church Observer*, Ken Gallinger, in order to discredit the church's historic affirmations about the deity of Christ, uses the fact that Jesus' "favourite name" for himself was Son of Man; indeed, in the synoptic Gospels it was. But in this portion of Matthew we have Jesus saying that all the nations will one day come before the One who can exercise a final judgement upon them, and that One is not referred to as "God", but as the Son of Man! Would Mr. Gallinger claim that in this instance Jesus couldn't possibly have been speaking of himself? If so, he would be invoking one of those unwritten laws used by some liberal Protestants to discredit the places in the Gospels that require a high *christological* interpretation of Jesus' identity.

I want to suggest that, even with only those verses in chapter 25 as a precedent, we shouldn't be surprised at the content of the final words found in Matthew. And, actually, they are in accord with what Jesus is quoted as saying throughout that Gospel. After all, the invitation at Matthew 11:28 is not "Go to God, all of you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens...", but is "Come to *me*...". How could any devout Jew utter such blasphemous words, unless...? Yes, unless!

In any case, I find it instructive to look at what comes immediately before those concluding words in Matthew. It says

“Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.” What an amazing reminder of the mysterious character of all Jesus’ resurrection appearances, that some might still doubt! And the “some” apparently come from among the eleven disciples! To me this reinforces the authenticity of the story, for Matthew, even in this very situation, is not glossing over that some of the disciples doubted.

In the end, however, the Gospels were written by the inheritors of those that worshipped him. The Christian faith was spread by those who took seriously the words, “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Go, therefore... And remember, I am with you always...”, since they were understanding God’s nature in a new way. And yet study groups in congregations throughout the United Church so often choose books, or are given books, for their discussions that express confidence in the authenticity of stories like the one about the woman taken in adultery, but encourage us to be skeptical about the reliability of passages like the one at the end of Matthew, on the grounds that the latter came from people who, however sincere they were, perverted Jesus’ real character and mission. St. Paul says the household of God is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone. In our beloved United Church virtually everybody, of course, wants to keep hold of Jesus, but many of our ministers and members are beguiled by the books that tell us the real Jesus wasn’t the one presented by the apostles and prophets.

— A.M.W.