



Craft Brewed Jesus by Michael Camp

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Excerpt of Chapter Two

Why History Matters

“That’s a lot of books!” I told Dan. “Did you read them all?”

“Pretty much,” Dan said. “But I have the advantage of being semi-retired.”

It was the night of our regular discussion group we attend and Dan had laid out all these books on his dining room table for all of us to see. It was an impressive array, maybe thirty or so. Dan was equally impressive. A dentist who served in the Navy and a fellow craft-brewed-Jesus seeker (also a major character in my first book), Dan had embarked on an enormous research

project last year. He began studying Christian history and its foundations without a sectarian agenda. In the course of one year, he read a plethora of books by a variety of authors. These books on the table represented the majority of them.

I glanced them over and in my mind added a few more that I had read to round them out. There was conservative Lee Strobel to agnostic Bart Erhman and most everyone in between. Moreover, there was pretty much every major scholar representing a variety of persuasions.¹ We also had a nice collection of historical studies and teaching on DVDs or podcasts.² So with Dan's leadership, our discussion group started down this path to study Christian history, which we called *The Timeline*. For some of us, it was a unique opportunity to look at Christianity with a critical eye. During the weeks and months ahead, much of what we read or heard and discussed in Dan's and his wife Gina's cozy living room and in local brewpubs was not even on the radar of our former evangelical or Catholic churches. It was the stuff your church never taught you.

Over the weeks we became engrossed in an historical drama that traced the origins, culture, communities, personalities, ancient texts, institutions, doctrines, and practices within Christianity over the centuries. We found lost history, unknown culture, obscure sects, an underground church, lost sacred writings, untold stories, neglected facts, and new paradigms on Scripture, the kingdom of God, and what it means to follow Christ. We had been stuck in the dark shadows behind enormous religious edifices the church and society had built and we were finally given the means to dispel the darkness and reveal the untold. Slowly, a more accurate picture of Christ, those he impacted, and their history began to emerge—one that in some ways, we scarcely recognized. It wasn't that everything was new, but that what was new made an enormous difference. This new paradigm made more sense and had the ring of truth to it. *Craft Brewed Jesus* is the way we traveled this historical journey. It taught us why history matters.

One of the first things we learned was that we can't be certain about many things. Mystery still abounds. But there are such things as historical facts and evidence. It's not a precise science, but nonetheless, it is a study with a scientific method that works in the realm of probabilities. Historians cite evidence or "traceable factors" to establish a high probability that something happened. No one can prove or know for sure whether Jesus was born of a virgin woman, but we can know with a virtually-certain degree of probability that Jesus lived as a Jewish wisdom teacher in the first century and spurred a counter-cultural movement opposed to both the Jewish Temple religious system and Roman imperialism. We know he was crucified by

¹ Karen Armstrong, Diane Butler-Bass, Marcus Borg, Greg Boyd, Walter Brueggemann, Harvey Cox, John Dominic Crossan, Jacques Ellul, Bart Ehrman, Brian McLaren, Robin Meyers, Mark Noll, Robin Parry, Lee Strobel, Thomas Talbott, Frank Viola, Garry Wills, N.T. Wright, and many more.

² "Saving Jesus," "Living the Questions," "Unbelievable" (Premier Christian Radio UK podcasts), "Bill Moyers Faith and Reason," "Beyond Our Differences," "The Place," and many more.

the Romans circa 30 C.E. in collaboration with certain Jewish religious authorities. We know his life and teachings have been documented, albeit with some disputes over what was original and what wasn't, in first-century sacred texts (the New Testament, the gospel of Thomas, the gospel of Peter, etc.) as well as other historical writings, such as Josephus, Tacitus, and Pliny the Younger.

We can know with high probability what many of those teachings meant to the original audience when we study them in the original Greek and place them into the mindset of Jewish and first-century culture. We can know with good confidence that Jesus was not a violent zealot as author Reza Aslan claims in his book, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*, because there is strong historical evidence that blatantly contradicts that conclusion and there is no conclusive evidence for it. In short, it's a wild stretch. When I saw leading Jesus scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan speak in Seattle in 2014, a questioner asked their opinion of Aslan's thesis. Trying to be kind in their assessments, Crossan called it "bad history" and Borg declared it was "cheap journalism." Similarly, we can know that the oft-claimed statement (that the New Atheists sometimes make) that "Religion has been the cause of all major wars in history" is simply untrue, as religious historian Karen Armstrong attests in her book, *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence*. History matters.

Why Study History

Another important point was how many of us have gotten away from learning in-depth history, thinking we already know it. We trust the traditions we have been taught—whether fundamentalism, evangelicalism, or liberalism—are faithful to the record. We are blind to the possibility that they may not be. Moreover, there is new information at our disposal. As Harvey Cox declares, our generation now "knows more about the actual origins of the Jesus movement than any generation since the first century itself..."³ Discoveries in archeology; biblical studies, early Christian writings, etc. give us a clearer picture. We need to revisit the history.

The result of our historical ignorance is we often misread and misrepresent the Bible, "church," and Christ. In turn, both believers and nonbelievers frequently base their opinion of Christianity, and how they live it out or respond to it, on false paradigms. Our study of *The Timeline* was our attempt to create a "historical fact checkers" version of contemporary Christian belief and practice. One that, as far as is humanly possible (in other words, our conclusions are not infallible and we don't pretend to have studied all pertinent sources), follows the Socratic principle: uncover the core narrative and go where the historical evidence leads. Moreover, allow

³ Cox, *The Future of Faith*, 56.

that evidence to impact the way we view God and live in the world. In so doing, we felt we were able to strip away misconceptions and uncover a forgotten or lost Path of Christ.

As Harvey Cox also states, what we think we know as Christianity through the ages and today is often a faulty perspective that does not reflect its central core.

There can be little doubt that many people who today feel a strong attachment to the life and message of Jesus become disenchanted, and sometimes even disgusted, with much of what historic Christianity became. Despite many glowing moments, it is often not a pretty picture. But the picture can be clarified when we notice both how much of that historic Christianity is a caricature of its essential core and that some of the liveliest and most promising Christian movements today are casting off this distorting crust.⁴

The question arises, once we get a clearer picture, what do we do with it? Are we called to emulate some romantic model of first-century Christianity? Actually, one of the discoveries is that there is no one right model. As Cox says, “Knowing about the past is vital not to *return to* it, but to *learn from* it, from both its mistakes and successes.”⁵

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⁴ Ibid., 80.

⁵ Ibid., 57.