

Greg Carey. *Sinners: Jesus and His Earliest Followers*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009. 200 pages. \$21.99.

Greg Carey wants to shake up his readers' view of Jesus and his followers. The title alone gives an indication of this. It implies that not only were his followers sinners but Jesus was also a sinner. Carey makes clear that most significantly this designation reflects how Jesus' contemporaries viewed him. Jesus was a transgressor of dominant social norms and was branded accordingly. While mainstream Christianity seeks the veneer and comportment of respectability, the origins of the faith lie at the other end of the social spectrum. Carey wants to provide scholarship that awakens Christians to a subversive Jesus and a subversive present day faith.

While the book is most likely destined for the shelves of pastors, professors, and seminarians, Carey notes that much of the material for it came from presentations in a youth leadership program at Lancaster Seminary. The ideas contained within it additionally arose in developing an adult education curriculum and leading seminars in churches. This formative process thus lends the book a voice that could resonate with a broader audience than a purely academic one. In the epilogue, for example, Carey endeavors to demonstrate how particular movies, television shows, and recent United States history can help connect the biblical discussions covered in his book to today's world.

Carey states that his "primary focus involves how early Christians came to understand their collective identity within their larger societies" (viii). In order to do this, he draws from theories in the fields of history, sociology, and cultural anthropology. To describe and explain sin as a social concept rather than a theological concept, he explores how historians understand the process by which certain marginalized women in New England became labeled as witches. To describe and explain some of the ways in which Jesus and his followers conformed and deviated from gender expectations, he explores how masculinity studies focus attention on the values, roles, and behaviors societies prescribe to men.

By applying theories from diverse fields to biblical interpretations, Carey effectively challenges and re-scripts common narratives of Jesus' life. For instance, a common narrative is that Jesus intentionally went against the purity laws of the Jewish faith in order to live according to an inclusive, universalistic ethic. By contrast, in the narrative that Carey tells, Jesus does not seek to violate the law. He instead provides a different interpretation of the law and in no way seeks to do away with the purity system. Moreover, Jesus does not reach out to the impure. They reach out to him, and he responds by trumping the power of impurity with the power of holiness.

This last example illustrates how Carey's work could be strengthened. Carey unsettles traditional views but often leaves one feeling as if a few more steps need to be taken in reconstructing a new narrative. One is left with a vague sense of what holiness is and what makes it especially significant in the interactions of Jesus with the impure. Carey quotes scholar David Rhoads as equating holiness with "wholeness," but that seems to offer less clarity rather than more clarity.

Likewise, in another chapter, Carey contends that during the time of Jesus masculinity was largely defined by competitive struggles over power and honor. He then describes how the gospels depict Jesus as someone achieving power through his public speaking. However, his summary of Jesus' crowd appeal as a speaker does not seem to shed much light on the texture and character of the masculine constructs one would expect to be revealed in this analysis. The Jesus of the gospels may well have been a champion debater, but one wants to know more about the ways in which this claim to power and authority has a specifically masculine dimension.

To be fair, the application of relatively new theories often lacks sophisticated nuance. Later works will hopefully further explore the trajectories Carey has helped pioneer. Carey is right to want to shake up his readers' views of Jesus and his followers. As a reader, a good shake can be refreshing as when Carey challenges one to understand righteousness not as the avoidance of sin but rather as doing justice and pursuing mercy. After absorbing Carey's interpretations, readers will want to have their views shaken even more.

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