

Jesus seminar to mark 25 years of questions

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(RNS) Since 1985, scholars affiliated with the Jesus Seminar have been casting doubt on the authenticity of sayings attributed to Jesus and questioning whether he saw himself as an end-times prophet.

As the seminar marks its 25th anniversary Oct. 13-16 in Santa Rosa, Calif., it's generating far less attention and controversy than in years past, when the media spotlight gave members a platform to reach millions.

Now observers are debating a new question: What difference has the Jesus Seminar made? Once again, the jury is divided.

Among the seminar's 100 fellows is a strong sense that the group has effectively made the general public more aware of questions surrounding the so-called "historical Jesus."

For example: By using color-coded beads to vote on whether Jesus likely said this or that, the group captured widespread attention, said John Dominic Crossan, chair of the 25th anniversary event.

"When some of our critics said, 'These guys are seeking publicity,' we said 'Duh! That's the whole purpose!'" Crossan said.

"We wanted people to know what we were doing. That was the whole purpose of the voting with colored beads and all the rest of that paraphernalia. It was designed for cameras."

Critics of the Jesus Seminar concede that the group deftly drew the spotlight and got a cross-section of people talking about Jesus. But they also fault the scholars for allegedly misrepresenting their views as mainstream and for shaking the faith of Christian communities.

"They created this impression that they were representing a genuine consensus of opinion that Jesus only said 18 percent of what's attributed to him in the Gospels and so on," said Duke Divinity School Dean and New Testament scholar Richard Hays.

"In point of fact, that was never so. They didn't represent the sort of consensus that they claimed to represent. It was a self-selected group of scholars who held a particular view."

The Jesus Seminar held its first meeting in Berkeley, Calif., as 35 individuals, mostly scholars, responded to an invitation from the late Robert Funk, who died in 2005.

Having rejected the fundamentalism of his youth, Funk was eager to assemble fellow scholars to dispel what he considered to be mistaken church teachings about Jesus, according to Lane McGaughey, a member of the seminar since its beginning.

What emerged from the group's semiannual meetings was a sense of Jesus as human, not divine, rising to prominence because of his social justice teachings, not because of his messianic status.

"The danger is that any of us will see in Jesus what it is that we're looking for," McGaughy said. "That is a problem not just for Jesus Seminar scholars but for conservative scholars as well."

Critics say the Jesus Seminar has long been an agenda-driven project marked by flawed methodology.

Fellows of the seminar defend its methods and its impact.

Crossan says that through the seminar, scholars fulfilled a moral duty to make their insights accessible to rank-and-file Christians and other curious people, not just academic journals.

McGaughy goes even further, saying the seminar, in presenting a historical and human Jesus, helped make Christianity meaningful for people who stopped believing doctrine and left the church.

"It's opened up some very interesting changes in a lot of these so-called dying churches," McGaughy said. "Because of the Jesus Seminar, a lot of people feel that they have permission to ask questions that they never before thought they could ask in church."

Without a doubt, the Jesus Seminar elicited strong reactions from scholars and clerics who defend tenets of orthodox Christianity.

The seminar provided a "wake-up call" for conservative scholars to popularize their own writings, said Ben Witherington, professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary.

"One of the positive effects is that it's changed the way the networks deal with that kind of subject," Witherington said. "They started bending over backward to get more of a spectrum of opinion about the historical Jesus because they realized there was such pushback to just interviewing the Jesus Seminar people."

After more than two decades of examining the Gospels, the Jesus Seminar is moving on. Fellows continue to meet, but they now focus on the biblical book of Acts and the letters of Paul.

The Westar Institute, an umbrella group for the Jesus Seminar, will in October publish "The Authentic Letters of Paul."

As the seminar moves beyond Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, critics say the initiative has ceased to compel public interest. Witherington sees the lack of public attention as a sign that the seminar is now largely irrelevant to public conversation about religion and culture.

Fellows of the seminar acknowledge that public attention has waned, but they aren't entirely disappointed. To some, being disregarded has become a badge of success.

"There is in a way less criticism of the Jesus Seminar now and less publicity in fact because our work has been accepted. It's no longer regarded as on the fringes," McGaughy said.