

Among the misfits

By [J. Nelson Kraybill](#) in the [June 1, 2010](#) issue

In Review



SINNERS



Sinners: Jesus and His Earliest Followers

Greg Carey

Baylor University Press

If Jesus and his improbable band of followers loitered in the town square today or showed up at church, what reception would they receive?

With economic stress feeding anti-immigrant prejudice, debates over sexuality heating up, and fear of terrorism percolating, Christians would do well to consider that Jesus fraternized with misfits and was himself a social deviant. Greg Carey—winsome communicator and professor of New Testament at Lancaster Theological Seminary—offers us colorful and compelling evidence that Jesus and his early followers often did not fit the mold.

Using Monty Python's spoof of a witch trial as a springboard, Carey jumps into a discussion of how the largely Jewish world of Jesus and his first followers used the label "sinner" to ostracize people who did not conform to societal norms. Scholars propose diverse reasons why New Testament authors might have labeled the woman who anointed Jesus' feet a sinner: all mortals are sinners, so this woman was no exception; uneducated common people could not be expected to know and observe all the law, so of course they were sinners; perhaps she was a prostitute.

But Carey posits that the sinner moniker reflects her social deviance, which "involves any behaviors that transgress generally accepted social norms." The woman, after all, had entered dining space that often was reserved for men. Perhaps this "sinner" who bathed Jesus' feet with her tears simply was the victim of a patriarchal and unjust society, something like "welfare queens" in recent America.

Cussing fishermen, compromising tax collectors and many other sinners found their way to Jesus; he received them, even dined with them. Carey agrees that some may have been guilty of "absolute" sin—conduct that most people would label immoral. But others were "contextual" sinners, under a cloud simply because they did not measure up to the expectations of oppressive social structures. Jesus was known as a rigorous moral teacher, but he openly embraced people whom Jewish society devalued or shunned. Surprisingly, Carey declares, the Gospels "include no stories in which he calls an individual sinner to repent." Jesus issued a generic call for all people to repent, and rather than heaping guilt or shame on vulnerable "sinners" at the margins of society, Jesus was more likely to inveigh against the abuse of power by persons of higher social status.

Jesus' words to the woman caught in adultery, "Go and sin no more," might suggest an individual call to repentance—but Carey suspects that later copyists inserted that episode. He sees Gospel authors going out of their way to show women of dubious personal credentials having a close connection with Jesus—starting with the four who appear in Jesus' genealogy in Matthew: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba. All

four had some history of cultic impurity.

It is common today for interpreters to say that Jesus got arrested because he violated religious Jewish purity laws. Carey smells anti-Jewish polemic in some such discussions and insists that purity concerns in ancient Judaism related more to stigma than to moral lapse. Jesus ignored or even confronted stigma, bringing “blessing to all persons, in all states, even across conventional social boundaries.” But in doing so, he did not break Israel’s purity laws.

Rather than obsessing about impurity, Carey says, Jesus promoted holiness, justice and healing. He healed lepers, socialized with gentiles and dined with tax collectors. Jesus did all this while scrambling gender roles. Eschewing traditional male functions, Jesus personally abandoned marriage, procreation, household and patronage. He and his male followers were “deadbeats,” mooching meals and lodging off of others. Though he exuded power and authority in a patriarchal society, Jesus was bested in argument by a (Syro phoenician) woman. Women financed his ministry.

The apostle Paul further unraveled gender differentiation by using feminine imagery (pregnancy, labor, nursing) to describe his own ministry. Just as Jesus likened himself to a mother hen, Paul spoke in socially subversive language that “implies a fundamental resistance to hierarchical convention.” In light of these conclusions, Carey finds it “keenly ironic” that today’s religious promoters of patriarchal family values do not know their Bible better.

However unsettling all of this may have been to the powerbrokers of Judea, Carey is certain that Jesus’ execution stemmed from political offenses he actually committed. Jesus fed revolutionary expectations with the triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the cleansing of the temple. He condemned the temple hierarchy, creating the danger of political instability, and critiqued the economic order. Carey sees Jesus’ commentary on the poor widow at the temple not as a heartwarming example of generosity, but as an indictment of temple authorities who would induce an impoverished woman to relinquish her last coin.

The most controversial aspect of Carey’s book is his treatment of the traditional view that Jesus was sinless. Did the earthly Jesus actually never have an ethical lapse? If the Christ child “grew in wisdom and in stature,” did he not have normal moral development, stumbling along the way? How could Jesus have avoided the guilt of

structural sin that comes, for example, from traveling on roads built by forced labor? Carey summons Dietrich Bonhoeffer's phrase "world come of age" to nuance Jesus' sinlessness. The German pacifist participated in a plot to kill Hitler, being willing to assume the guilt of assassination as part of a larger just cause.

Throwing a Niebuhrian curveball, Carey says that an "innocent" Jesus does not overpower sin, but a "righteous" (justice-pursuing) Jesus does. Aside from Carey's argument that Jesus was tainted by generic structural evil, it is not clear what sins Carey thinks he might have committed. But Jesus so single-mindedly pursued the reign of God that he was willing to die the ignominious and hideous death of crucifixion. Rather than skirting around blood language, as many Western Christians now do when talking about atonement, Carey engages the grisly crucifixion as further evidence that Jesus provoked scandal.

Carey enters into the social and political controversy he finds in Jesus and the early Christians: he is a contributing editor of *Out in Scripture*, an LGBTQ-friendly lectionary resource sponsored by the Human Rights Campaign. Some times he skates close enough to the edge to take your breath away. His arguments need scrutiny. But *Sinners* is a terrific read, an exemplary attempt by a serious scholar to make Jesus and the gospel relevant for the mission of the church today.