

Untamed Jesus

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In Review

Gerhard Lohfink



NO IRRELEVANT JESUS

On Jesus and the Church Today

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Distinguished New Testament scholar Gerhard Lohfink and his brother, Norbert Lohfink, a Jesuit and an Old Testament scholar, are members of the Catholic Integrated Community in Germany. The community was founded in 1945 by

Catholics who thought that Nazi rule in Germany was not some freak event but an indication that a deep moral failing was at the very heart of German life. Members of the Integrated Community believe that if Germany is to have a moral future, a fundamental reconstruction of German life is demanded. That project, they believe, requires a people committed to living as an alternative community. The Catholic Integrated Community now has over a thousand members.

That Lohfink and his brother are members of the Integrated Community is no surprise given the character of their work, which is centered in the presumption that faith is entry into a long history constituted by a people whose lives have been shaped by a narrative enacted in rituals. That history is first and foremost the history of God's promised people, Israel—a history that Christians have suppressed. This suppression of Paul's message in the ninth through 11th chapters of Romans is what made the unsurpassed horror of Auschwitz possible. Christians' suppression of Israel and the Jews has also meant that Christians misunderstand the character of the church.

English readers' introduction to Lohfink's account of the Christian faith came in his book *Jesus and Community*, published in 1984. There Lohfink responded to the oft-made suggestion that "Jesus came preaching the Kingdom and instead we got the church" by observing that Jesus could not have founded a church because there had long been a church—namely God's people, Israel. The calling of the disciples and the requirement that they renounce violence, Lohfink argued, manifests Jesus' determination to call into existence a people who are an alternative to the world.

When I first read *Jesus and Community*, I thought Lohfink must have gained his fundamental perspective by reading John Howard Yoder, but there has been no indication that he knows anything about Yoder. That he is innocent of Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus* makes his work all the more significant because without being influenced by the Anabaptist thinker he has developed christological and eschatological arguments that are quite similar to Yoder's readings of the New Testament. Lohfink is clearly a deeply committed Catholic whose understanding of the church might be characterized as conservative by some, but in Lohfink's hands a conservative reading of texts has radical political implications. The same, of course, is true of Yoder. Many have argued that Anabaptists are much closer to Catholicism than to the forms of Christianity associated with the magisterial reformers.

No Irrelevant Jesus is composed of short talks Lohfink has given over the years that are filled with exegetical and theological wisdom. The only comparable writer I can think of is Herbert McCabe. Both McCabe and Lohfink have a genius for helping us see the significance of basic convictions and actions that make the Christian faith the Christian faith. For example, Lohfink reads Mary's Magnificat as a song of the people of God about the great "overturning" that began in Abraham and finds its culmination in Jesus.

Lohfink revisits many of the themes he began to develop in *Jesus and Community*, but the talks in *No Irrelevant Jesus* are for nontheologians. In a chapter on the taming of Jesus he argues that Jesus is tamed when we cease speaking of his imminent return, when we ignore his sharp words against the rich, when we avoid the significance of his celibacy, and when we forget his stance against divorce. Jesus-taming strategies are designed to reduce Jesus to a gifted charismatic who at best can be identified as a gregarious social worker. Jesus is tamed by such descriptions because they conceal his claim to being the truth of God.

Lohfink's account of Jesus is determinatively eschatological. Jesus' death and resurrection is a radical creation that results in a new conception of time. In Christians' unique understanding, the end of the world does not come at the end, because we already live in the midst of the end time. The new creation does not arrive only when the old creation has passed away; it has begun already within the old world. In Christ's death and resurrection God's new world has begun, and in baptism every Christian receives a share in it.

Though Lohfink writes as a Catholic, his high view of the church is not a case of special pleading; rather, it correlates with his Christology and eschatology. The church is ever new exactly because it must constantly look back to its past. The church is more modern than any other society because it has a better memory—because God is acting in it to ensure that it remembers the future. The newness of that memory was gradually lost after Constantine, but the rise of the secular state dissolved the marriage of church and state, which was a blessing for the church. Lohfink is trying to help us make the most of the freedom that God has given to the church in the world in which we now find ourselves.

Lohfink is a German determined not to forget the terror that was Nazi Germany. This book is also relevant for the challenges facing Christians in America. His is a vision, deeply grounded in scripture, that I believe is our future.

