

Slow to answer: The reticence of Jesus

by [Garret Keizer](#) in the [April 5, 2005](#) issue

One of the paradoxes of Jesus as he is portrayed in the Gospels is his way of combining candor with reticence. As understandably concerned as we are with what Jesus said, it is striking to consider all that he did not say, along with the many times when he spoke by indirection. “He did not speak to them except in parables.” “He answered her not a word.”

Even the more talkative Jesus that we find in the Gospel of John can occasionally unnerve us with his silence, as in the story of the woman taken in adultery and in his interrogation before Pilate (“But Jesus gave him no answer”), and with the relative terseness of his postresurrection speeches. Indeed, John gives us the impression that the risen Christ has vanquished not only sin and death but also his own propensity for Johannine-style rhetoric.

The idea of a reticent Jesus stands in stark contrast to our image of the wordy Word with an answer to everything. When people ask, “What would Jesus do?” they are often asking, in effect, “What would Jesus say?”—assuming he would say anything at all. Granted, they are standing on solid enough ground. Jesus did not always evade or disappoint the people who came to him seeking a good word. But he often left them with more freedom to interpret his meaning than they may have wanted—or than you and I may want. I imagine that many Christians would prefer a Last Supper fashioned on the model of a Socratic symposium: lots of dialogue, lots more on the menu besides bread and wine, and a few more words describing the significance of the entrées.

The idea of a reticent Jesus also stands in stark contrast with our own volubility on the subject of Jesus. He has shed his blood for us and we continue to shed our ink for him. Lately we have seen a number of books about and a great deal of interest in the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas—an interest that derives not only from its being apocryphal, and thus novel, but perhaps also from the fact that Jesus does nothing

in its pages from beginning to end but talk. However the Jesus of Thomas may square with the Jesus of the canonical Gospels, he squares with our own tendencies quite well.

As for the canonical Gospels, it is interesting to note that among those passages missing from the lectionary cycle used in most churches is that admittedly harsh (and for a writer, downright terrifying) pair of verses in which Jesus says: "I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless [the King James version says "idle"] word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." Of course, we can attempt to soften the text by wrangling over the exact meaning of "careless" or "idle"—though not without risking a charge of aggravated idleness.

Subject to the same risk, we can describe the reticence of Jesus through a system of classification. The following categories cover most cases:

- **Jesus simply refuses to talk.** We have already referred to the only examples I can recall: his silent replies to Pilate and the woman of Syro-Phoenicia. In both cases Jesus breaks his silence after a bit of cajoling. His reticence never amounts to recalcitrance.
- **Jesus is strikingly terse.** This covers a multitude of one-liners. As a subcategory, we can cite those instances where Jesus refers some questioner to another source; for example, he refers the rich young ruler to the laws of Moses and the interrogating high priest to the crowds who have already heard him preach. Just as Jesus criticizes the "vain repetitions" of those who pray verbosely, he balks at repeating what is already well known. I've always understood the words of Abraham in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus to reflect something of Jesus' own attitude: "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."
- **Jesus talks "off the subject."** Asked to divide an inheritance, Jesus talks about covetousness. Asked about imperial taxes, Jesus talks about the glory due to God alone. He does not talk at length in either case.
- **Jesus answers questions with questions.** The question that prompts the parable of the Good Samaritan—"Who is my neighbor?"—leads to the question that concludes it: "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

- **Jesus speaks through parables or cryptic sayings.** Many of these can be described as pictures worth a thousand words.
- **Jesus is silent on subjects we wish he would have addressed.** But see the conclusion to “Jesus is strikingly terse” above: his silence may amount to cross-referencing. I don’t hold with the argument that every instance of silence in the Gospels amounts to an implicit endorsement of something found in an older text (e.g., that by not saying anything about homosexuality Jesus is deferring to the prohibition in Leviticus), but I do grant that this is at least a valid argument. That said, the number of cases where Jesus challenges tradition makes for an argument every bit as valid. His silence on some issue need not be interpreted as conservatism but rather as an example of his perhaps misplaced faith in our ability to “get the point” of his liberating message. In any case, Jesus offers a new punch line to the joke that starts off, “What’s the shortest book in the world?” The book where Jesus settles every argument.

The word “argument” is key, I think. In more than one instance, the reticence of Jesus seems based on an awareness that often we’re not talking about what we appear to be talking about; that our arguments can actually be attempts to obscure the issues, just as our questions can be attempts to justify ourselves. “Then a lawyer, wishing to justify himself . . .” Listen sometime to the “questions” that come into a typical radio call-in program, and you’ll have some idea of what Jesus was facing—and of how short a time he would have lasted as a talk-show host. He refuses to take the bait, or if he does, he tosses it back on his own hook. As for “pearls of wisdom,” he will not cast them before swine. In radio terms, this is called dead air.

Christology reveals psychology, or pathology as the case may be. That is certainly true of what I’m writing here. What do Leonardo da Vinci, Mel Gibson and Garret Keizer all have in common? None of them can paint a portrait of Jesus without revealing something about themselves.

To tell the truth, I find that I am growing increasingly, alarmingly sick of religion—as a subject. It was once the first section I visited in a bookstore; now I may not stop there at all. I trust this is no more than a passing phase, natural enough in someone who has just stepped away from 20-plus years in a pulpit, but quite powerful nonetheless. I would liken my state of mind to that of a young man who grew up in a brothel. It’s not that he despises prostitutes, some of whom have been very kind to

him over the years; it's just that he finds something refreshingly beautiful in the sight of a woman fully clothed and on her feet.

I can imagine a reader saying that "going on retreat" might do me some good at this point, but retreat is the whole crux of my problem. I can't get around the hunch that we have made Jesus a subject for endless discussion, speculation and study in the hope that we can prevent him from transforming our lives. Are we not like the "writer" who'd rather talk about the book he's writing than write it?

After a while the Jesus-talk begins to feel like an act of spellbinding, a magical incantation by which we hope to keep Jesus in the grave, be it the little keepsake box of pietistic preciousness or the sterile sarcophagus of textual criticism. Zen Buddhists speak of a certain kind of pupil who "stinks of Zen." Is it possible, I wonder, to stink of Jesus? If it is, then the stink is of a dead body, and I've begun to grow queasy from it. Even as I write yet another article about you-know-who.

Thinking about Christ invariably leads us to thinking about Christian community. That is always heartening, I think. It is proof that however much we may be off the mark, we are still thinking in Christian terms. To think with the mind of Christ is to think about the people of Christ.

Thinking about a reticent Jesus leads me to imagine a more reticent Christian community, one that speaks about Christ in inverse proportion to the degree that it loves Christ. One that places communion above communication, and committed action above all. One in which Christ is known in the breaking of bread and in the conscious, constant and militant breaking apart of the barriers that divide people—barriers that, as often as not, derive from the idle use of words.

It could be argued that the community I imagine is perversely inadequate to the needs of our time. Aren't we in dire need of Christian witness, especially when Christianity in America seems in danger of being hijacked for purposes of political expediency? Yet is it not a superficial—and largely verbal—conception of "witness" that has created this crisis to begin with? If the devil wishes to buy a congressional seat, he makes the purchase with the coinage of Christian vernacular.

We don't need to make changes in the mint; we need to drive the moneychangers from the temple. We need to remember that when Jesus did the same thing, he was performing an action that spoke louder than words. Perhaps because words were simply not up to the job.