In his steps: Beyond the assumption that everybody is just like us

by Robin Lovin in the October 3, 2006 issue

I'm teaching "The Bible and Ethics" this semester with my New Testament colleague Mark Chancey. It should be a pretty straightforward project, since most moral advice in the church begins and ends in scripture. But connecting text and practice in a rigorous way turns out to be surprisingly complex, both for professors and for students.

We decided to begin simply, with Charles Sheldon's novel *In His Steps* and Sheldon's question, which all the students know: What would Jesus do? The answers in the novel exude Social Gospel confidence, suggesting that any "genuine, honest, and enlightened Christian" could figure out what the Savior portrayed in the Gospels would do. Sheldon's characters come up with the answers with a good dose of sociological analysis and a minimum of biblical citation.

Sheldon pictures Jesus in the 1890s America that the author knew. But the modern editions of *In His Steps* usually portray Jesus in his own historical context, teaching his disciples on a rocky hillside or striding onto the scene dressed in a homespun Galilean robe. Sheldon aimed to put Jesus in *our* context, while today's editors and publishers instinctively think that asking, "What would Jesus do?" means following Jesus around in *his* world.

The truth is that Jesus is not trying to answer our questions at all, but is asking his own. It's only when we realize this that we have any chance of figuring out what it might mean to be his disciple.

Putting ourselves in his world might be the first step. Certainly, we today are more serious about the Bible than our Protestant predecessors were a hundred years ago. They read it as a repository of wisdom that confirmed what the social workers and sociologists were teaching them about the moral perils of modern life. We understand better than they did how important it is to have some place to stand against currently accepted truths and values. We read scripture to keep ourselves

from thinking that something must be true just because everyone else says so. We read scripture when we are in need of liberation and a place to stand against the stereotypes that limit our vision. We read scripture in order *not* to see ourselves as others see us. Even for our undergraduates, the Bible is a handbook for Christian nonconformity.

What makes the connection between text and practice so complex today is just how much we now know about that strange world of the Bible. A lot has been dug up—literally—during the past hundred years. The world that Jesus lived in is at once better known and less familiar to us than it has ever been. It is a strange mix of cultures and religions where the available options don't easily map onto the choices that are available to us, where relationships of cruelty and domination were taken for granted, and where ties of loyalty and obligation rested on social connections that we cannot easily untangle and that we sometimes don't even see. Modern scholarship presents us with a biblical world that really is strange.

Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer taught a generation to resist Nazi corruption of the churches by rediscovering the strange world of the Bible. These theologians never confused the word of God with words on a page, even when that page was a page of scripture. The call to return to the Bible was an effort to find a place where that word could be heard without being drowned out by the noise of the surrounding culture. That is particularly a problem when the surrounding culture is marching in lockstep and shouting militaristic slogans. But what we discover when we try to recover the world of the biblical text is that there was plenty of noise in that culture too. Even out on the hillsides, apart from the towns, along the Galilean shoreline, Jesus was incarnate in a network of expectations, loyalties and history that make it impossible to know exactly what his questions meant to his contemporaries. We can make approximations and increasingly educated guesses—and people who preach and teach regularly should be relying on the best current scholarship for that purpose, rather than their own imaginations or half-remembered seminary classes. But the word is not back there waiting to be dug up and photographed any more than it is waiting to appear on command to "genuine, honest, and enlightened" Christians today.

Teaching a course on the Bible and ethics left us (the ethicist and the biblical scholar) feeling both more necessary and less useful than we expected to be. A knowledge of our context is essential to asking the right questions; a knowledge of biblical context is essential to understanding the biblical answers. But the questions

and the answers don’t match up as neatly as anyone’s method might lead us to suppose.

The strange world of the Bible that Barth and Bonhoeffer wanted us to enter is not located in a particular place or time. But they were right to think that we cannot enter it as long as we suppose it is readily available to us, right where we are now. The hardest part for students is moving beyond the assumption that everybody else is just like us and always has been. Biblical scholarship cannot deliver the word of God by taking us to the biblical world, but it may help us to live a little less in our own comfortable, familiar world. When we ask, “What would Jesus do?” our efforts to follow in his steps will mean moving away from the place where we were when we first asked the question.