

Review of Garry Wills' *What Jesus Meant*
The Oakhurst Library Committee
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The mystery of Jesus. That's what this complex, multi-level book--Wills' "devotional" and statement of faith--is all about.

Garry Wills, student of ancient Greek and St. Augustine, famous Christian scholar and intellectual, professor emeritus of history at Northwestern University, and winner of the Pulitzer Prize for *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, "offends everyone," as one critic writes, in this slim volume of eight chapters published in March, 2006.

Wills offends everyone who believes that Jesus had a political agenda or can be claimed by any political party. He offends members of institutional religions that build great cathedrals and churches, including his own Catholic fellowship. He offends Protestants who wear "What Would Jesus Do?" bracelets on their arms. He offends hardliners of his own and other formalized denominations of Christianity. Religion, Wills insists, was Jesus' enemy. Jesus' religion was far more profound: it was a religion of the heart.

Wills makes the familiar case (but with fresh insight) that Jesus was a "radical-egalitarian" and subversive. He was either the Son of God (as Wills believes) or a lunatic and blasphemer. Jesus preached in huts and houses, on mountain slopes and beaches. He preached to the working class, to the homeless, and to the outcasts. Jesus, himself, was "a man of the margins." He drank too much, some said. He was not polite--even to his parents. He was not ambivalent. He was not predictable. How can we, flawed mortals, possibly know what Jesus, the Son of God, would do? Wills chides. "Jesus is not like us....Jesus has higher rights and powers." Jesus is a "divine mystery walking among men."

What Jesus meant, Wills insists, was to "reveal the Father to us, and to show that he is the only-begotten Son of that Father. What he signified is always more challenging than we expect, more outrageous, more egregious." This claim is enriched by Wills' own New Testament translations of the semi-literate *koine* (a Greek language of "brutal linguistic earthiness") in which the Gospel was originally written. This section includes a snide anecdote about Nietzsche, a trained classicist, who remarked "that if God wrote the New Testament, he knew surprisingly little Greek." And this related snippet: Jesus wasn't born in a *manger*, he was born in a *hay trough*. (Puhleeze! This is *koine*. Translate it right!) And finally this: "[T]he Book of Revelation is especially ungrammatical." All news to me.

Wills also discusses Jesus' inauguration of "the reign of God" (It is now); homosexuality ("those persecuting gays are persecuting Jesus"); Thomas Jefferson (wrongly) scissoring out the parts of the New Testament he didn't think applied to the real Jesus; and a dozen other subjects.

The NY Times and Newsweek reviewers admired this book. The Washington Post reviewer hated it and snarled back, "The Library of Congress holds close to 17,000 books on Jesus, and about the best thing that can be said about [this book] is that it is probably not the worse....[It] "is a strange brew of devotional cant and historical Jesus clichés." A Jesuit theologian writes on the Internet: "Wills is still trapped inside his incoherent theology."

Whatever its faults, this books resonates with my life.

In November, 1955, two years after he was "born again" at the age of 54 in a small traditional Methodist church, my father came into the house from the garage and said unexpectedly to Mother, "I don't think I have long to live." A few days later my father awoke from a dream and roused my Mother. "I just dreamed that I was with the Lord," he told her. Mother saw, "beyond my understanding," she told me afterwards, that Dad's countenance was aglow with a mysterious light. Dad knew again, in those astonishing, inexplicable moments before the light faded, that he was going to die.

I carry vivid fragments of memory of that last Christmas with my father. I was sixteen. Alone one evening in our small living room, I breathed in the pine-scented air and watched the blinking lights on the Christmas tree cast orbs of changing colors on the angel hair and strands of foil icicles. I was overwhelmed by the exquisite beauty of life, of family. I felt a surge of well-being, of inner joy and peace. Under the tree was a new lunchbox I had wrapped for my father. I didn't know that Mother and Dad had already bought the suit for Dad to wear at his funeral and that the new television set was to soothe the suffering of their four children after he was gone. Four weeks later, while riding home from work, Dad's side of the car was struck by a drunken driver. Dad's pelvis was shattered. He died from a blood clot a few days later.

Thus, a mystery about Jesus in my own family links me to this book. Despite his deep rationality, Wills' faith embraces the mystery of Jesus, the mystery of love which we must, Wills insists, give to each other totally and unconditionally. My father, a man with a tragic past, found redemption in Jesus' love.

In fact, it is this mystery of Jesus--this mystery of love that Wills so eloquently trumpets, that brings me to this church.

Love is at the heart of Oakhurst.

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Wills, Garry. *What Jesus Meant*. New York: Viking, 2006.