

The Jesus Driven Life
Adam Erickson
The Raven Foundation

The landscape of American Christianity, indeed, of world Christianity, is changing. Of that there can be no doubt. Terms like “postmodern Christianity” and “emergent Christianity” permeate our culture. Unfortunately, while few people actually know what these terms mean, there is a palpable sense that change is afoot. That change scares many, while it excites others.

In his book *The Jesus Driven Life*, Michael Hardin explores the transformation Christianity is experiencing today. He has one primary answer for the many dilemmas facing 21st century Christians. That answer is simple, but far from simplistic. The answer, of course, is Jesus. And that’s the obvious answer – middle school youth groups throughout the United States (including mine!) implicitly know the answer to difficult questions posed in youth group meetings is always an emphatic . . . “Jesus!” Unfortunately, the wisdom of our middle school students has become blurred in American Christianity. This is one of Michael’s greatest points, as he argues that North American Christianity has a “theology (a doctrine of God) without a Christology (a doctrine of Jesus)” (157).

The problem of a Christless Christianity is nothing new. For much of its history, Christianity has scapegoated Jesus right out of the Gospel. We have unconsciously replaced the God of Jesus with what Michael terms a “Janus faced god.” I think this term is very helpful, for Janus was a Roman god with two heads that faced in both directions. The two heads of Janus symbolized the god’s dual will to violence and to peace.

The spirit of Janus infects all of human culture. Indeed, it even infects the Bible. Using the insights of mimetic theory, or mimetic realism, Michael makes a cogent and a very understandable case that humans project our own violence onto God, or the gods. This process justifies our use of violence against one another, for if the gods are violent, our violence is justified, too.

Michael points out that, despite the biblical affirmation that God is One (Deut 6:4), the people who wrote the Bible often fell into a Janus faced view of God. This is one of the strongest aspects of *The Jesus Driven Life*. Michael doesn’t run away from the violence in the Bible, but offers a way to interpret that violence. For Christians, the answer is not our own interpretation of the Bible, but to interpret the Bible through the lens of Jesus. If we neglect Jesus in favor of our own interpretation, we will succumb to the spirit of Janus. (*Sola scriptura* no longer works!) Michael claims, “As far as I am concerned, in Christianity, it is all about Jesus or it is about nothing” (273).

Throughout his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus finally and concretely reveals that God is One and thus does not have a dual will. Rather, God’s will is love. For example, when Jesus was asked which commandment in the Law is the greatest, he replied, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:36-40). Michael reflects on this move that Jesus makes in the transformation of the human understanding of God from a Janus faced god to the *Abba* of Jesus, stating,

“God is not a mixture of yin and yang, good and evil, terror and love. God is consistent with God’s self. The gods of our theologies might be mixed up, but the one who made the heavens and the earth is and always will be the One we are called to love because God is Love” (35).

Placing Jesus at the center of our lives changes the way we understand not only the Bible, but also our personal lives, our relationship with others, and our relationship with the world. Let me provide an example. I know Michael, and I think he would appreciate me saying this: Michael is no saint. He has no pretense to holiness. But Michael knows something at the core of his being. He knows that Jesus changes everything. I once asked Michael how he could be so sure that there is no wrath in God, but that God’s only desire is love. “Brother,” that’s one of his favorite terms, “I know God is love because I trust Jesus.”

Indeed, when Christians begin to trust in the all-embracing love of God revealed in Jesus, the world will be transformed. I hope and pray that *The Jesus Driven Life* will become a primary guide for Christians as we continue to move into the 21st century.

Review by Brian Borger Hearts and Minds books

The Jesus Driven Life: Reconnecting Humanity with Jesus Michael Hardin (JDL Press) \$17.95 I mentioned that I wanted to suggest some titles you might not otherwise know about. This is written by one of the smartest guys on the planet, a Lancaster, PA, fellow who, after leaving the narrow and intellectually unsustainable views of Jesus from his fundamentalist past, undertook years and years of study to see how the pieces of the Bible might fit together, linking Rabbinic thinking about Hebrew Scripture, Jesus' own re-working of Torah, and how early church letters thought about the saving work of the peace-bringing Savior. The book is exciting and big in its vision. It has some oddities about it (the many fascinating and important footnotes are inexplicably in Roman numerals making it maddening to use; the author is prone to condescend and the tone shifts from irenic to bombastic, from chatty to arcane, too quickly for my tastes; he is remarkably familiar with the latest controversial speculations of the Jesus Seminar and the oldest views of the church fathers but seems to not care much about the best evangelical thinkers of our day (although, to his credit, he cites Ben Worthington and N.T. Wright and Luke Timothy Johnson on occasion); he sees the cryptic work of [Rene Girard](#)--mimetic realism and psychological insights about scapegoating-- as *the* key to understanding the nonviolent atonement; he leans a bit on the work of Walter Wink without a nod or a wink to Marva Dawn's important critique of Wink's view of the powers; he tends to lack nuance in his dismissal of "American" Christianity, without really saying which branch or sort of American faith he despises.) So the book is weird and, for me, finally less than convincing.

Yet, yet, yet, it is so very interesting, learned, challenging and provocative that I happily recommend it to anyone serious about studying our Lord and Savior Jesus and learning more about the gospels in their first century setting. It is not for those who haven't read much Biblical scholarship or who don't enjoy serious digging. Brian McLaren has a dear forward and, as Brian will do, he tells you five themes to watch for. One, of course, is Michael's absolute love for the person of Jesus and his serious commitment to follow Him. He may say goofy things without explaining (like that certain gospel texts aren't historically

accurate) but his love for those texts is palpable. And sometimes, what he says about them is very, very good.

This hefty volume, despite the annoying title, is important for anyone wanting to be brought up to speed on the latest sorts of conversations happening in the neo-liberal/modernist wing of the church. Well, that isn't exactly fair, since Michael hangs around with the guild of super-academic scholars, progressive Christian peace activists, and old-order Mennonites and he clearly rejects some of the liberal dismissal of the salvific work of Christ offered by old-school liberal theologians and higher critics. Like N.T. Wright (but more so, or so it seems) he is fluent in--and often appreciative of--- the world and assumptions of the Bible critics, yet wants us to love Jesus and embrace His commonwealth. Still, he cites the latest stuff from James Alison, Dale Allison, Marcus Borg, Walter Wink, Rita Nakashima Brock, Dietrich Ritschl, and a host of scholars from Europe and the states; this is not your mama's Sunday school class, that's for sure. Is he right? Does his novel take on things bear Godly fruit? Does his knowledge of ancient insight and his insistence on importing the work of Girard into the Story make sense? You must decide, but it is a book worth struggling with.

Conservative evangelical friends will wonder why I promote a controversial and provocative book with a rather rare thesis. I don't know, to be honest. I like much of what he says here about how to handle the Bible (even while I vigorously disagree with some of it), and those of us with more traditional understandings need to be pushed and probed by others who know the Hebrew and early church stuff well and have much to teach us. Michael seems as quick to cite the Loeb Classic Library edition of *Josephus* or the 3-volume *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* or the *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* as he is the church fathers or 20th century phenomenological philosophers. (He reminds us often that Enlightenment logic is simply not adequate as an epistemology for knowing this stuff and, of course, he is right!) And, as you must know, I agree with his basic assertion that Christ taught non-violence and that we are called to the holy work of peacemaking. And, I don't know of any other Christian book that cites the prog-rock band Yes.

A friend of Michael's is Tony Bartlett, another rising star in the peace-able, Girardian, Biblical criticism movement, whose robust Biblical nonviolence allows him to move in ways that those wedded to more traditional presuppositions may not. Bartlett has a new book coming early next year, *Virtually Christian*, which Hardin cites approvingly. As I said, Michael draws on a plethora of sources and he knows oodles of good folks. Hardin's other work can be seen in the notable volume on the atonement of Christ which he co-edited, *Stricken by God?* and his work in the Colloquium on Violence and Religion. You can find more of his Biblical comments at www.PreachingPeace.org. You may not find his deconstruction and reconstruction of the Christian faith fully compelling, but I think you will be glad for the experience. It is an amazing piece of work. Read *The Jesus Driven Life* and see what you think.

http://www.heartsandmindsbooks.com/booknotes/more_bible_study_resources_tho/

COV&R Bulletin 2010
BOOK REVIEWS

Hardin, Michael: *The Jesus Driven Life. Reconnecting Humanity with Jesus*
Lancaster, PA: JDL Press, (2010), 318 pages,
ISBN: 978-1-4507-0945-3; \$ 17.95

In a storm at sea you have two options: put in to the nearest harbor and measure wind and wave safely from the shore; or spread sail to the gale and ride boldly in front of it. Michael HARDIN has chosen the latter. His book, *The Jesus Driven Life, Reconnecting Humanity With Jesus* is a cry from the deck of a surging, storm-driven craft.

The storm HARDIN is riding is the profound change in human culture wrought by the gospel and made both intelligible and insistent in the work of GIRARD. The actual craft he is piloting is the kerygma itself, the proclamation of human redemption through Christ. HARDIN has written a book of evangelism, an evangelical book, but one that looks very little like traditional evangelism. He is writing out of a moment in time when the gospel is discovering a new identity, one that has been working in the wheelhouse of history for two thousand years and that has now, in these latter days, produced conditions in which it can be heard as if for the first time.

Nevertheless, although it is Girardian anthropology clearly teaching HARDIN that “surf’s up” he does not spend time at the beginning outlining a Girardian framework. Rather he strives to display his argument as a perennial gospel, a truth that has always been there within the Christian scripture and tradition. For authentic belief that must indeed be the case—“Christ the same yesterday, today and forever”. But the urgency of HARDIN’s approach and his constant threading between worn-out channels of liberal and fundamentalist thought speak to a fresh hermeneutic carrying him forward, a current he has discovered and that he now articulates with verve and passion. All the same his direct approach, his firm grasp of the tiller, is exactly as it should be: a message that of its own power has changed the parameters in which we experience the human, and whose ability to do is cresting in our time, has essentially no need of framing. It can be presented in and for its own sake. In a moment that the gospel itself has created the gospel may itself speak.

HARDIN sets out on a biblical journey which will take him from the Great Commandment preached by Jesus to the radical Logos declared by John. His journey as it proceeds will bring him back to primeval waters at the origins of culture and then across the tides of the Old Testament. His book has a chiasmic structure beginning and ending with the New Testament while intersecting it with both human and biblical genesis. It is in this middle piece, obviously, that GIRARD is presented and the pivotal role of the anthropology of violence and the victim is unpacked. There appear a number of underlying reasons for this structure. First, connected to the kerygmatic purpose, the form of the book echoes and narrates its own central and constantly repeated proposition: that the bible can only and ever be understood from the standpoint of Jesus, “our primary interpretive matrix” (38). Second, and somewhat more awkwardly, there is need to enshrine the Girardian hermeneutic within the larger discipline of New Testament criticism. Why? Because for HARDIN, like all New Testament scholars, there is a scholarly discipline governing his work, with its own exacting canon and method. Mixing GIRARD with this discipline leads to the accusation of a single overpowering grid by which every text is read, preventing it perhaps from speaking

for itself. I will return to this crucial question momentarily, but let me first flesh out the vital message HARDIN is relaying.

He begins with the love commandment in Jesus' teaching, interpreted by the words of the lawyer that love of God and neighbor is "more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices" (37). He moves to Jesus' relationship with his Father which cannot be a blend of love and wrath, producing a "Janus-faced God", but rather consists solely of love. Then there is the Sermon on the Mount as a to-be-taken completely-seriously catechesis for Christian converts. By now it is clear that HARDIN is himself providing a catechesis, one that shows us Jesus engaged in a redefinition of God. "By removing retribution from the work and character of God, Jesus, for the first time in human history, opened up a new way, a path, which he invites us to travel." (64) As we continue familiar topics are understood in new ways, judgment, hell, Messiah, retaliation, atonement, and at the end there are valuable expository sections on Paul and John, especially Paul. But to establish this catechesis HARDIN has also to deal with why this has so manifestly not been the dominant paradigm for two thousand years: he is obliged to stir the waters of church history. He indicts Constantinian (armed) Christianity alongside assimilation to a Platonic thought-world beginning in the second century. He sees JUSTIN MARTYR as a pivotal figure but he also suggests there was a whole atmosphere breathed by the sub-apostolic church which set up the eternal idea of God behind the scriptures and thus missed the radical shift brought by Jesus. HARDIN also names AUGUSTINE "the most influential Christian ever" and says he "provided a theological justification for victimizing" (123). It's hard to exaggerate the break from a long acculturation which HARDIN is making.

But I sense an unresolved tension in HARDIN's scriptural account, and I comment on it because I think it is in fact a fruitful and promising tension. It seems difficult for him to establish clearly his relationship to historical critical Jesus studies. He says he reads the gospels "through several lenses all at the same time" and holds all the various methods of criticism in a "suspended state" (29), which is in effect a way of saying "trust me" when it comes to reading a text. Of course all scholars do this and seek to hide the fact by the force of rhetoric and/or logical analysis. We have all heard by now of the constructed nature of texts. However, the New Testament, and the gospels in particular, are a special case: they make a claim to history and no interpreter is going to deny that at some point and in some measure there is real history here. Something must have really happened to create Christianity. If we then introduce the Girardian hypothesis to the mix we add a new, profoundly historical layer, a meta-history which can even account for all of history. How do you combine these levels with any kind of symmetry, let alone humility? I personally believe the confluence of the two (gospel history and scapegoat anthropology) is little less than "the sign of the Son of Man" and that a truly consistent approach will at some point acknowledge this. In other words we must put all our cards face up on the table. The vigor of HARDIN's writing, as already suggested, is testimony to this dramatically new hermeneutic context. But how does it work in practice? The beginning sections of HARDIN's volume, the ones on Jesus, are, I think, the most compelling of the book. At one point he relates the episode in Luke 4—Jesus' preaching in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth—and suggests "there is an authentic story underlying this text" (59). According to HARDIN, therefore, what we have is a moment in time when Jesus consciously and deliberately breaks from the violent nationalism of his contemporaries, from the words and interpretations that fed this. But an even more persuasive "real time" episode is, I think, the "shutting down of the temple" as HARDIN terms it and describes very well. This is such a scandalous episode that it not only certainly precipitated the decision to kill him but it seems to be not plainly understood by the Synoptics (Mark and Matthew) or it

is even deliberately played down (Luke). Only John fully exposes the anti-sacrificial content, as HARDIN points out. And John moves the incident to the front of his gospel, in order to signal from the beginning the religion-shattering character of Jesus' intervention. To begin a catechesis of Jesus from this point would effectively merge GIRARD's meta-reading of the New Testament and actual historical criticism. Jesus really did shut down the temple and this together with his death and resurrection has remade the world.

Michael HARDIN is the first authentic Girardian evangelical. His is not an evangelicalism about guilt, death, forgiveness of sins and eternal life, but about the way we are, and the way we destroy each other and our world. Its thrust is entirely contemporary and part of a crisis the gospel itself has helped produce. What is implied is an historical transcendental, a concept which is a scandal in itself: an intervention within the contingency of human events that remakes the absolute condition of the human. The considerable power and brio of Michael HARDIN's work derive from the way it rides this hermeneutical moment, radicalizing our understanding of gospel and inviting whoever will pay attention to become part of it.

Anthony W. Bartlett

Review of *The Jesus Driven Life*
Marlin Jeschke
Mennonite Weekly Review
Nov 29 2010

On my desk is [The Jesus Driven Life: Reconnecting Humanity with Jesus](#), by Michael Hardin, published by JDL Press, 2010, 318 pages, \$17.95.

Michael Hardin was raised Roman Catholic, converted at the age of 18 to dispensationalist fundamentalism and later went to North Park Theological Seminary but then left the ministry and the church. Somewhere along the way he discovered the theologian René Girard and a fresh reading of the Jesus of the Gospels.

Today Hardin lives in Lancaster, Pa., and attends Akron Mennonite Church. "I travel a lot in historic peace church orbits these days," he says, "particularly among the Mennonites." Two Mennonites, Willard Swartley and Ted Grimsrud, lend their endorsement to this book, as does Anabaptist-leaning ecumenical leader Shane Claiborne.

Hardin's intellectual inspiration, René Girard, is a Frenchman who taught 14 years at Stanford, retiring in 1995. Girard sees the central problem of human society as scapegoating, of which the crucifixion of Jesus is the most famous example in history.

Humans tend to resolve conflict by blaming some individual or group, then punishing or even killing that individual or group to "bring peace."

Such a practice does not, however, bring lasting peace. New conflicts arise that society attempts to resolve in the same perverse way again and again. In Jesus' death, God exposed this sinful syndrome of victimization and showed how it could be brought to an end. Unfortunately, says Hardin, Christians turned the meaning of Jesus' death around in the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement, turning God into a God who endorses victimization.

Hardin seeks to undo this mistaken concept of God, Jesus and the cross, by showing that Jesus embodied God's intent to abolish forever all victimization and its attendant violence. This violence pretends to resolve guilt by blaming and punishing or even killing some victim, sometimes in our personal lives, sometimes in national wars.

Using Girard's theory about victimization, a theory Girard got from the New Testament, Hardin shows how Jesus taught against victimization and violence. He goes on to explain how the victimization syndrome got reinstated by Constantinian Christianity. He demonstrates how this anti-violence, anti-victimization view appears in the Old Testament and is consistently taught by Jesus and Paul.

With the title of this book, *The Jesus Driven Life*, Hardin suggests that if we take Jesus seriously as the revelation of God we can no longer posit a two-faced God, one who loves us but at the same time remains angry and demands victims, whom we define as enemies, personal or national.

The book gets technical in some places, which may make it daunting for those with little background in theology or biblical studies. Some typos, errors and poor punctuation distract the reader's attention.

At the same time the book offers clear turns of phrase and memorable illustrations and applications. One involves a president who claimed to receive permission — not from his earthly father, a former president, but from his "heavenly Father" — to launch a war in Iraq. Can this "heavenly Father" be the Father, the Abba, of Jesus Christ, if Jesus is truly the revelation of God?

Hardin deserves commendation for helping to strip away a widespread misunderstanding of Jesus and misconception of the character of God wrought by Constantinian Christianity. He helps us once again to be inspired by the authentic Jesus of the New Testament and to have our lives shaped by him. Church groups looking for a study topic this winter might consider this book.

Marlin Jeschke is professor emeritus of philosophy and religion at Goshen College.

The Jesus Driven Life

Michael Hardin

JDL Press, 2010

Paperback, 317 pages

The Covenant Companion January 2011

John E. Phelan Jr.

Michael Hardin thinks the problem with most churches and most Christians is that they don't pay enough attention to Jesus. Sure, Jesus is an important figure because of his saving death. He is honored

and worshipped and praised in Christian communities around the globe every Sunday. But too often this is a “glorified” Jesus, a stained glass Jesus, not the Jewish Rabbi of Galilee who lived, taught, died, and was raised in a particular historical context among a particular people. Michael calls for a return to Jesus as teacher, disciple maker, and community builder. Although Michael is a Mennonite and the director of Preaching Peace, a nonprofit organization “dedicated to educating the church in Jesus’ vision of peace”, he was once a Covenant pastor (and is a graduate of North Park Theological Seminary). He still sounds like a good Pietist when he insists that “a crucial component in understanding Jesus is following him” (JDL, pg. 23). But for many western Christians Jesus is a peripheral figure and his teachings either unknown or ignored. Michael insists that if we are going to be able as a church to address the violence and brokenness of our world our lives will need to be *Jesus driven*. And this will require us actually knowing what he taught and how he lived.

Michael begins his book by exploring the nature of Jesus’ God, the character of Jesus’ teachings, and the ultimate message of the kingdom of God. As both Mennonite and follower of Rene Girard he argues that the crippling problem of human violence is profoundly addressed by Jesus’ teaching about the Father and about the coming Kingdom of God. The nature of this violence is explored and exposed by Jesus’ passion. The community formed around Jesus’ teachings and resurrection is called to live from the example of Jesus non-violent love and to stand against the violence inherent in the “scapegoating” behavior of individuals and the casual brutality of the state. “The story the Bible tells,” he writes “is how God in Jesus entered the cultural religion of sacred violence, suffered its most horrible side effects and revealed that the mechanism is ungodly and doomed.” (JDL 155) The resurrected Jesus calls us to a new humanity, a new hope, and a new way of living over against the violence of this world.

I cannot do justice to this rich, complex, and, at times, controversial book in such a brief review. Reading it is like a long conversation with Michael--full of brutal honesty, snarky wisecracks, grace-filled passion, and hope. There is something in *The Jesus Driven Life* to delight and enrage almost everyone! I encourage you to accept Michael’s challenge to take seriously once again what Luke Timothy Johnson once called “the real Jesus”—the one who turned the world, and continues to turn the world, one its head.

Nathan Nettleton
John Mark Ministries (Australia)
<http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/28030.htm>

I’ve just finished reading an outstanding book called “The Jesus Driven Life: Reconnecting Humanity with Jesus” by Michael Hardin (Lancaster: JDL Press, 2010).

It is not easy to find, but can be ordered online from the author at <http://www.preachingpeace.org/jdlpress/> Currently under \$15.

It comes with enthusiastic Foreword and Afterword by Brian McLaren and Walter Wink respectively, and commendations from a number of other scholars across a range of traditions.

The book is an exciting blend of Christology, Bible theory, anthropology, and social ethics. It's basic thrust is that all biblical interpretation and theology must be done with Jesus as its central lens. When we do that, it argues, we find Jesus revealing a God who is consistently compassionate and merciful, and who calls us to imitate Jesus in renouncing vengefulness and pursuing pathways of reconciliation and peace.

Hardin acknowledges that there are many passages in the Bible that portray God as angry, vengeful, violent, punitive and bloodthirsty. Drawing on the theological/anthropological insights of Rene Girard, he outlines a theory of the historic relationship between religions and vengeful victimisation, and then shows how within the pages of the Bible we see a developing struggle between these preconceived conventional views of God and the radical alternative view which eventually takes flesh in Jesus and is vindicated in his resurrection. About half of the book is given to careful considerations of this biblical material, starting with a chapter on "How Jesus read his Bible."

The book is thoroughly evangelical (Jesus and gospel centric) and unashamed to proclaim the uniqueness of Christ without being discourteous to other major faiths. I found it to be one of the most illuminating books I have ever read. It wove together so many important insights into a exciting large scale vision of what Jesus means for the world and how we are invited to participate in that. I would encourage you all to put it on your reading list as soon as possible.

The book could certainly serve as theological text book, but it is probably pitched more at the scholarly end of the popular Christian literature market (alongside the likes of Philip Yancey and NT Wright). It is structured to be usable for a 32 session study group, and there are companion DVDs available to support such a use (but I haven't seen them).