

RENEWED
HEART
MINISTRIES



αwakenings

∴ THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF RENEWED HEART MINISTRIES ∴ JANUARY 2022 ∴

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Herb Montgomery

Jesus' Baptism as Social Protest

by Herb Montgomery

Our reading this week is from Luke 3:15-17, 21-22:

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire...Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'"

This week, we're beginning a new calendar year and we are also in the season after Epiphany. Jesus' baptism in Luke compiles several passages from the Hebrew scriptures, beginning with the story of the inauguration of the ancient King David:

"I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, "You are my son; today I have become your Father." (Psalms 2:7)

This inauguration happened in the context of opposition by foreign oppressors of Israel.

"The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and his anointed." (Psalms 2:2 cf. 2:10)

The story of Jesus' baptism also echoed two passages from Isaiah:

"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, *in whom my soul delights*; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice



to the nations...He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching. (Isaiah 42:1-4, emphasis added.)

"A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. *The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him*, the spirit [feminine] of wisdom [sophia] and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness [justice] he shall judge [deliver] the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth." (Isaiah 42:1-4)

The one "in whom I am well pleased" was to be associated with the world of establishing justice on the earth for the marginalized and oppressed. And the one on whom the spirit of the Lord rested would deliver the poor and bring equity for the meek. In both Matthew's sermon on the mount and Luke's sermon on the plain, the reign of God is proclaimed as belonging to the poor, while the earth is the inheritance of the meek, those typically walked on by the powerful and privileged.

These associations set us up to understand Jesus' baptism in a new way.

Jesus' baptism has been understood in terms of a salvation that addresses

only individuals' personal or private sins rather than establishing systemic justice in place of systems that harm vulnerable and marginalized people. This creates problems with the text.

John's baptism called people to repentance. But if that repentance was a rejection of private or personal sins then Jesus' baptism becomes nonsensical because of the claim that Jesus had no private or personal sins to repent of. The Early Church Father Jerome, who lived in the 4th and 5th Century quotes from the Gospel of the Nazarenes in which Jesus initially rejects being baptized by John because he has never committed a sin.

Jesus' exceptionalism also made his association with John and John's baptism problematic for those Christians who no longer wanted be associated with Judaism or who wanted to communicate Jesus as superior to all including John.

To the best of our knowledge, the gospels were written down in this order: Mark, Matthew, Luke and then John. Reading them in that order, we see progressive attempts to distance Jesus from John, to portray Jesus as greater than John, and to declare that John and John's movement was only a precursor of Jesus and the movement based on his life and work. By the time of John's gospel, John the Baptizer doesn't even baptize Jesus. And in Luke, if we take Luke's chronology seriously, John is already in prison by the time Jesus is baptized. This is unlike the early gospels of Matthew and Mark, where John

continued on page 3

baptizes Jesus.

As we've stated, John preached a baptism of repentance, and John was Jesus' mentor. How are we to make sense of this?

Consider Luke 3:10-14:

And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.")

John's baptism called for repentance for social, systemic sins. Repentance is a paradigm shift where you begin to think about things differently, and so John's baptism of repentance symbolized rethinking how society was structured in relation to power and privilege, who was included and benefited, and who was excluded and on whose backs the elites profited.

This brings me to this week's point: an alternative lens for interpreting John's baptism of Jesus.

John's baptism invited people to denounce the present order, to cleanse the canvas so to speak for something different to be born.

Consider this commentary:

"It is a genuine act of repentance. As such it ends his participation in the structures and values of society. It concludes his involvement in the moral order into which he was born." (H. Waetjen, *The Construction of the Way into a Reordering of Power: An Inquiry in the Generic Conception of the Gospel According to Mark*, quoted with permission by Ched Myers in *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Gospel*, p. 129)

When we read the story of Jesus' baptism through this lens, it was about rejecting, or being cleansed of a society maintained by unjust institutions through which power is unjustly ordered.

It was a rejection of the way Rome had oppressed Jewish society and how Jewish elites had become complicit in Roman oppression of Jewish people. Jesus' baptism meant rejecting these social constructions, especially the elitist ordering of power, privilege, and profit.

In the gospels, we read of a Jesus who made it his life work to challenge his society's oppressive structures. It makes perfect sense that he would have initially been a disciple of John's, been baptized into John's critique, and then, once John was jailed, embarked on his own mission through the wilderness and into the marginalized regions of Galilee

proclaiming that the just reign of God had arrived.

Jesus was the one who, like David, was called "Son" in the context of oppressive structures. He was one in whom the Divine delighted, whose work would be to establish justice in the earth. Jesus was one upon whom the Divine feminine spirit of wisdom (sophia) would rest, and who would deliver the poor and bring justice to the meek.

This makes me wonder what our baptism-like rituals today are. How do we, too, publicly reject present systems of injustice? I think of marches I have participated in that were largely symbolic, calling for change at most and rejecting the present way of doing things at least. Protests often use symbolic actions to reject the present order and call for something more just.

So what difference does it make for us as Jesus followers, as we start this new year, to interpret Jesus' baptism not as repentance for personal sins but rather as rejection of the injustices of the current system? Jesus' baptism was a cleansing with water, a preparing the way for something better to take root and spread.

What new ways of ordering our world are our baptisms preparing us to engage?

Another world is possible.

And that world begins with our denouncing and turning away from the injustices of our time. ■



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RHM's Recommended Reading for January

American Democratic Socialism: History, Politics, Religion, and Theory

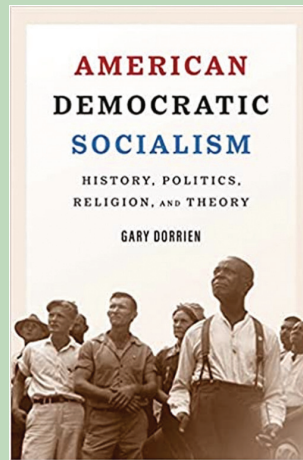
by Gary Dorrien

A sweeping, ambitious history of American democratic socialism from one of the world's leading intellectual historians and social ethicists.

"Gary Dorrien is the greatest theological ethicist of the twenty-first century, our most compelling political theologian, and one of the most gifted historians of ideas in the world. His *American Democratic Socialism* is a work of astonishing erudition. Best of all, Dorrien is not only a searing chronicler of prophetic thought, but also a bold Christian participant in the historic quest for social justice."

—Michael Eric Dyson
author of *Entertaining Race: Performing Blackness in America*

Democratic socialism is ascending in the United States as a consequence of a widespread recognition that global capitalism works only for a minority and is harming the planet's ecology. This history of American democratic socialism from its beginning to the present day interprets the efforts of American



socialists to address and transform multiple intersecting sites of injustice and harm. Comprehensive, deeply researched, and highly original, this book offers a luminous synthesis of secular and religious socialisms, detailing both their intellectual and their organizational histories.

"Dorrien's book is a tour de force. With eloquence and rigor, it reveals the strong history of democratic socialism in the U.S. It imagines an economic democracy that weds ecological survival with economic, racial, and gender justice. That is a matter of life and death."

—Cynthia Moe-Lobeda
author of *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation*

"The book highlights Dorrien's striking thinking as a strategist in the fight for socialism as well as a superb historian who brings the role of religion into the center of the story."

—Richard Healey, Senior Advisor,
Grassroots Policy Project

"*American Democratic Socialism* is a brilliant and timely book. Dorrien offers a big, ambitious, synthetic political and intellectual history of the whole American democratic socialist tradition, giving particular attention to religious socialists, the centrality of race in American politics, and the intellectual contributions of women."

—Geoffrey Kurtz

author of *Jean Jaurès: The Inner Life of Social Democracy*

"This is the history of American religious socialism we need as we debate and organize for greater equity in the political economy. Dorrien brilliantly excavates the unique intersectional contexts of the U.S. helping us understand how we got to this political moment and where we might go next."

—Melissa Snarr
Vanderbilt Divinity School.

About the Author

Gary Dorrien is the Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary and Professor of Religion at Columbia University. His previous books with Yale University Press include *The New Abolition*, *Breaking White Supremacy*, and *Social Democracy in the Making*.

Remember, you don't have to order this book through [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com), but if you do, please consider using Amazon Smile ([smile.amazon.com](https://www.smile.amazon.com)) and selecting Renewed Heart Ministries as your designated charity for a portion of your purchase to be donated to RHM at no additional cost to you.

Quotable Quotes

"A moral reckoning is upon us, and we have to decide, once and for all, whether or not we will truly be a multiracial democracy."

—Eddie S. Glaude Jr.;
Begin Again



Photo by Nicholas Swatz from Pexels

SOCIAL JESUS

A Blog Exploring the Intersection of Faith and Societal Justice



Recent Posts from RHM's "Social Jesus" Blog on Patheos

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/



Christmas Means Centering the Voices of Women (Part 1 of 3)

"The Christmas and childhood narratives of Jesus in the gospels are following an ancient format. Once we identify this we can take away some important applications for us today."

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2021/12/christmas-means-centering-voices-women-part1/

Christmas Means Centering the Voices of Women (Part 2 of 3)

"Joseph is neither centered nor given any voice at all in this story. Let's talk about why this may have been the case originally and also how we can, today, make life giving applications from this that center the voices of women."

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2021/12/christmas-means-centering-voices-women-part2/

Christmas Means Centering the Voices of Women (Part 3 of 3)

"We, too, can choose to listen when a woman has the courage to tell her story, even if it seems "impossible" to patriarchal men."

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2021/12/christmas-means-centering-voices-women-part3/



The Feminist Liberation of Advent (Part 1 of 3)

"Those who heard Luke's narrative and were familiar with the stories of the Hebrew scriptures would have recognized Elizabeth's greeting as an echo of earlier Jewish narratives of liberation brought about by women."

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2021/12/feminist-liberation-advent-part1/

The Feminist Liberation of Advent (Part 2 of 3)

"Medieval images of Jael often depict her as a prefiguration of Mary the mother of Jesus."

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2021/12/feminist-liberation-advent-part2/

The Feminist Liberation of Advent (Part 3 of 3)

"Mary's story, like Jael's and Judith's, is much more scandalous. The life growing in here will not prepare for liberation. No, this life will tell the story of the way of liberation itself."

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2021/12/feminist-liberation-advent-part3/



Advent as Too Political (Part 1 of 3)

"The concern is for justice to be practiced within society because deeds prove

social repentance is more than lip service."

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2021/12/advent-political-part1

Advent as Too Political (Part 2 of 3)

"A Christianity that focuses on achieving entrance into heaven without regard for injustices being committed right now is out of harmony with these narratives."

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2021/12/advent-political-part2

Advent as Too Political (Part 3 of 3)

"Social location matters. Which communities in which social locations have we chosen to speak out alongside?"

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2021/12/advent-political-part3/



Advent, Hope, and Living on the Margins (Part 1 of 3)

"The gospel message here, and one of my favorite Advent themes, is that salvation, change, and liberation don't come from the center of our societies, but from the margins."

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2021/11/advent-hope-living-margins-part1/

Advent, Hope, and Living on the Margins (Part 2 of 3)

"Before any social change has ever taken place, years of groundwork has been laid. Change doesn't always take that long either."

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2021/12/advent-hope-living-margins-part2

Advent, Hope, and Living on the Margins (Part 3 of 3)

"Advent tells a liberation story that 2,000 years ago inspired hope in those who were being forced to live on their own society's margins. Can it for us today?"

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2021/12/advent-hope-living-margins-part3/

Quotable Quotes

"When women are restricted from the service of God in any capacity, the Church is mistakenly allowing an imperfect male-dominated ancient culture to drive our understanding and practice of Christ's redeeming work, instead of Jesus Christ and the whole of the Scriptures."

– Sarah Bessey;
Jesus Feminist: An Invitation to Revisit the Bible's View of Women

"Women are equally created in the image and likeness of God, equally redeemed by Christ, equally sanctified by the Holy Spirit; women are equally involved in the on-going tragedy of sin and the mystery of grace, equally called to mission in this world, equally destined for life with God in glory."

– Elizabeth A. Johnson;
She Who Is

EPISODE 401: CHRISTMAS MEANS CENTERING THE VOICES OF WOMEN

"We, too, can choose to listen when a woman has the courage to tell her story, even if it seems "impossible" to patriarchal men . . . If we are to take these Christmas narratives seriously, then we must center the voices of women in our society. We can choose to listen when they tell their stories . . . we, too, can follow the example of Luke's Christmas narratives by centering women's voices and pushing back against present-day expressions of Christianity that are patriarchal, that seek to silence women, or that still refuse to allow women to teach, be ordained, or hold positions of leadership."



New episodes every Friday!

The Jesus For Everyone podcast.

A weekly podcast where we talk about the intersection of faith and societal justice and what a first-century, Jewish prophet of the poor from Galilee offers us today in our work of compassion, love and justice.

renewedheartministries.com/Podcasts



Weekly Zoom HeartGroup Every Wednesday Night

"I've experienced paradigm shifts in my thinking that are transforming my spiritual journey."

That's what one participant recently wrote. Each Wednesday evening, Glendale City Church hosts a Zoom-HeartGroup led by Herb Montgomery. Our discussion each week will focus on the content in Renewed Heart Ministries weekly eSight articles and the *Jesus For Everyone* podcast published each Friday. The time of each Zoom session will be on Wednesdays at 7:00 p.m. Pacific/10:00 p.m. Eastern.

Email us at info@renewedheartministries.com to receive the link for the Zoom meeting.

Renewed Heart Ministries is a nonprofit organization working for a world of love and justice. We need your support to impact lives and provide the kind of resources and analysis RHM offers.

Intersections between faith, love, compassion, and justice are needed today more than ever.

Please consider making a tax-deductible donation to Renewed Heart Ministries, today.

To do so online go renewedheartministries.com and click "Donate." Or if you prefer to make a donation by mail, our address is:

Renewed Heart Ministries
PO Box 1211
Lewisburg, WV 24901

And to those of you out there who are already supporting this ministry, I want to say thank you. We continue being a voice for change because of your support.

**Last Year's Projected
Budget Goal: \$185,000.00**

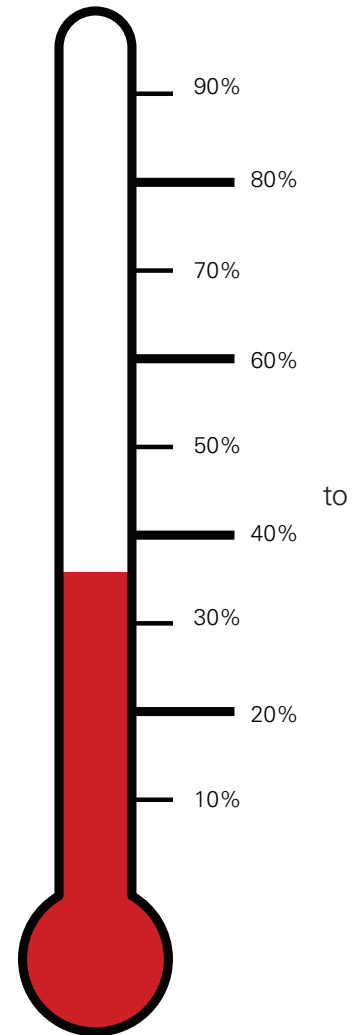
**Budget Goal Through
November 2021:
\$169,583.37**

**Contributions Received
Through November 2021:
\$66,033.67**

**November's Budget Goal:
\$15,416.67**

**November's Contributions
Received:
\$4,605.53**

**Whether you give
\$5 or \$5,000,
every amount helps us
continue our work.**



Quotable Quotes

"These metaphors of spirit over nature, mind over body, as male over female, master over slave, also sanction the hierarchies of social domination. They are made to appear to be 'natural'; not as social constructs but as the tiers of a necessary and divinely created order of things."

– Rosemary Ruether;
To Change the World: Christology and Cultural Criticism



Photo by Tima Miroshnichenko from Pexels

Renewed Heart Ministries is a not-for-profit group that is passionate about rediscovering, following and helping others rediscover the teachings and sayings of the historical Jesus of Nazareth. We believe these teachings have an intrinsic value in informing the work of nonviolently confronting, liberating and transforming our world into a safe, more just, more compassionate home for us all.

Everything we do here at Renewed Heart Ministries is for free. Even the many educational events that we hold in various venues. You can support our work either with a one-time gift or by becoming one of our monthly contributors by going to RenewedHeartMinistries.com and clicking the **donate** tab at the top right.

Or you can mail contributions to:
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Also, please sign up for our free resources and remember, every little bit helps.

And to those already supporting the work of Renewed Heart Ministries, your generous support makes it possible for us to exist and to continue being a presence for positive change in our world. So with all of our hearts, "Thank You."

Together we are making a difference, till the only world that remains is a world where only Love reigns.

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Front cover artwork by Ali Montgomery.

"BUT THE STORIES OF JESUS'S BIRTH ARE MORE THAN SENTIMENTAL. THE STORIES OF THE FIRST CHRISTMAS ARE BOTH PERSONAL AND POLITICAL. THEY SPEAK OF PERSONAL AND POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION. SET IN THEIR FIRST-CENTURY CONTEXT, THEY ARE COMPREHENSIVE AND PASSIONATE VISIONS OF ANOTHER WAY OF SEEING LIFE AND OF LIVING OUR LIVES."

Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan
The First Christmas

renewedheartministries.com

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K. Hard

