



STATEMENT DB-174

## EFFECTIVE EVANGELISM

### **Correcting Buddhist Misconceptions About Christ**

**by J. Isamu Yamamoto**

A few months ago my mother sent me a monthly newsletter that the San Jose Buddhist church distributes among its members. My mother thought the major article in the newsletter would prove what she had been saying for nearly 30 years — that the differences between Buddhism and Christianity are insignificant compared to what they have in common, and therefore any further discussion between us about these differences would be a waste of time.

In fact, the article compels me to alert my Christian brothers and sisters to the false notions Buddhist leaders teach their followers about Christ. These misconceptions can seriously impede Christian attempts to evangelize Buddhist people with the saving power of the gospel.

What makes presenting the uniqueness of the person and work of Jesus Christ especially difficult is that these Buddhist leaders express nothing but praise and admiration for Jesus. Rev. Ronald Y. Nakasone, the author of this article,<sup>1</sup> describes Jesus as "remarkable," "enlightened," "spiritually gifted," and even "close to Buddhahood."

Nakasone says the purpose of his message is to promote the spirit of ecumenism between Buddhists and Christians. He claims that both the Buddha and Jesus advocated the same things — such as justice, living joyfully, and being uncompromisingly honest and sincere — and that their lives personified the same noble ideal. Anyone who responds critically to his assertions is made to sound narrow-minded and intolerant — the prevailing perception non-Christians have of Christians. Meanwhile, Nakasone appears tolerant and sensible — a reputation Buddhists have cleverly fostered about themselves in the West.

Nakasone's message is specifically addressed to Jodo-Shinshu Buddhists, who are primarily Japanese Americans. He is not speaking directly to Christians or to anyone else outside his religious group. In fact, his ostensible hope is that his people will develop a better understanding and appreciation of the central figure of the Christian faith.

Yet what Nakasone purports as the accurate portrayal of Jesus Christ is actually an attempt to undermine the foundation of the Christian faith. No matter how much he lauds Jesus, he still rejects the biblical testimony of who Jesus is and what He did. Instead, he tells his people that the Bible is the creation of later generations of Christians, who adopted a Jewish teacher from Nazareth and created a myth about him.

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Nakasone did not draw his conclusions about Jesus from thin air. Rather, he based his comments on the recent academic work of Burton L. Mack,<sup>2</sup> whom he describes as an eminent biblical scholar whose insights are supported by the preceding century's unquestioned academic research. For Nakasone, Mack's views about Jesus are not only authoritative, but also far more erudite than those of conservative biblical scholars.

According to Nakasone, Mack demonstrates that the true source for the biographical account of Jesus of Nazareth is a document known as "The Book of Q" (Q from *Quelle*, German for source). Nakasone asserts that Mack has reconstructed the original gospel of Jesus, which was a collection of sayings recorded during His lifetime by His earliest disciples. Although these sayings indicate that Jesus was extraordinary as a teacher and social crusader, "nowhere," says Nakasone, "does the Book of Q speak of Jesus' divinity, his resurrection, the redemption, the Trinity, or any of the other doctrines normally associated with Christianity." Nakasone then quotes Mack as saying, "The remarkable thing about the people of Q is that they were not Christians. They did not think of Jesus as a messiah or the Christ."<sup>3</sup>

Nakasone also teaches his Buddhist community that the four Gospel writers not only used The Book of Q as the source for their respective accounts, but also amplified their Gospels by including bogus materials in order to form a legend around Jesus as a godlike savior. Moreover, the letters of Paul took the worship of Jesus a step further by articulating a doctrine that helped establish "a cult of the Christ."

With seeming magnanimity, Nakasone concludes that Buddhists actually have no problems with the "historical Jesus" and "his true teachings." "I am certain," he states, "that the Buddha and Buddhists can accept much of, if not all, of what the Jesus movement proposed."<sup>4</sup> According to Nakasone, both Jesus and the Buddha called for social justice and advocated a more equitable society. "Jesus and Buddha," he says, "believed in the essential dignity of all humanity."<sup>5</sup>

Nakasone's attempt to make Jesus more palatable to Buddhists affects Buddhists in several ways. First, they receive a false picture of Jesus. Whereas before they probably knew little, if anything, about Jesus, now they come to believe He was an outstanding champion for social justice and personal integrity, but certainly not incarnate deity on a mission to save humanity through His death and resurrection.

Second, they wrongly presume to have a far better understanding of Jesus than we evangelical Christians do. Since Nakasone frequently quotes such a "renowned" biblical scholar as Professor Mack, Buddhists tend to accept their leader's message without question. If Burton Mack has "proven" beyond a doubt that Jesus never claimed to be the Christ, then the biblical account of Jesus is more fable than fact. When we proclaim the good news about Jesus to them, they think to themselves, "You don't know what you're talking about." They smile condescendingly and casually dismiss whatever we say about Jesus.

Third, their confidence in the superiority of their own religion becomes even more ingrained. If Jesus essentially taught what the Buddha taught several centuries after the Buddha had attained enlightenment, then in a sense Jesus was a follower of the Buddha. Therefore, why abandon the best and highest truth for a religion that only imperfectly reflects and even warps that truth? To most Buddhists the answer is obvious.

Nakasone is not alone in expressing this perception of Jesus. Other Buddhist leaders have adopted the views of liberal scholars like Mack and paraded this inoffensive Jesus among their flocks. It is imperative, then, that we understand the problems that may arise when we share our faith in Christ with our Buddhist friends.

Our initial approach is crucial. If we assume that we are engaged in a battle of doctrines or in a philosophical debate, we will not gain a serious hearing. In fact, having known many Japanese-American Buddhists throughout my life, I also know that most of them understand less about the central teachings of the Buddha than nominal Christians know about Jesus. This is understandable because our culture is much more expressive of Christianity than of Buddhism. Consequently, to ask them to articulate the doctrines of their faith or share their personal comprehension

of the Buddhist dharma (truth) would serve no purpose beyond having a brief conversation. Of course, this is not necessarily true of other Buddhist groups in our society.

We should keep in mind that most of these Buddhists — both practicing and nonpracticing — are Buddhists because of tradition and habit, and because it's their cultural identity. If we think we must dismantle the pillars of the Buddhist philosophy, we will not get very far in retaining their attention, no matter how astute our insights might be. For example, Nakasone says, "The Jesus movement's call for a more inclusive vision of the human family, echoes the Buddha's acceptance of outcasts and women into the Sangha [Buddhist community of saints]."<sup>6</sup> Nakasone's audience undoubtedly accepts this as fact, and even Nakasone probably believes what he said. The truth is that the Buddha had a low view of women, which Buddhist scholars will admit. The Buddha lived in a caste society where women had no value, and, although he accepted people from all castes and women into his community, he permitted the inclusion of women only after setting up a strict code that placed the nuns in roles far inferior to the monks. This point can be brought up to your Buddhist friends, but what good would it do other than to make them feel defensive?

I am certainly not advocating that Christians *remain* silent on these issues. Eventually it might be quite illuminating to a Buddhist woman for you to contrast the Buddha's statements about women with the Bible's treatment of women. Yet this sort of discussion should only occur once mutual trust has been established. Initially, we need to be kind, cordial, and sincerely interested in them as persons first and Buddhists second.

The other major obstacle we must overcome is their attitude toward us. Though we should not immediately challenge their religion, we should defend our own faith, correcting any misconceptions they may have about Jesus. Nakasone's and Mack's assaults on biblical Christianity demand a response. We should make it clear that Burton Mack's statements reflect only one stream of thought in biblical scholarship. We can say that some of the Gospel writers might have used an earlier "Q" document as an aid to forming their own accounts of Jesus' life and teachings, but that Mack's interpretation of what was contained in the Q document is only conjecture, most likely influenced by his personal antitraditional view of Scriptures. The fact is that any talk about "Q" is conjecture, since no such document has ever been found. The primary sources for the life of Jesus are the four Gospels. And the authors of those Gospels were themselves either eyewitnesses of the events they record, or they interviewed such eyewitnesses in compiling their accounts. Thus their portrayal of Jesus as a divine Savior is not a later distortion but represents rather the devout understanding of His *earliest* disciples.

Once we demonstrate that biblical Christianity is defensible, we should note that the common elements that Nakasone finds between Buddhism and Christianity, though important, are actually secondary to their central doctrines. While avoiding the appearance of saying Christianity is right and Buddhism is wrong, we can simply point out the glaring differences between the two religions. For example, we believe that Jesus is God, who died so that we might be cleansed of our sins and enjoy eternal fellowship with God in His heavenly kingdom. Most Japanese-American Buddhists believe in living an egoless life so that they might be reborn in a temporary paradise until they experience total extinction.

To sum up, we should emphasize that the biblical account of Jesus is reliable and that there is no agreement in the primary doctrines of the Buddhist and Christian faiths. Once we establish these two points, and once a mutual respect has been established, we can discuss the merits of the teachings of the Buddha and of Jesus Christ.

We might commend Nakasone and other Buddhists like him who want to tell people of their admiration for Jesus as a good man. Indeed, Nakasone began his sermonlike article with a beautiful Buddhist poem describing a good man, whom he relates to Jesus. But Jesus was not merely a good man; He is the almighty Lord and Savior. Unless we bow before Him and worship Him as the Son of God and as the one true Redeemer, none of our poetic praises of Jesus will draw us any closer to God and His salvation.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ronald Y. Nakasone, "The Authentic Life: Reflections on Jesus of Nazareth," *The Dharma* (newsletter of the San Jose Buddhist Church Betsuin), February 1995, 2-5.

<sup>2</sup> See Burton L. Mack, *The Last Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> Nakasone, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.