

The Historical Jesus: So What?

Charles B. Cousar

Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

You are standing at the door of the church greeting members and guests as they leave. The sermon seemed to go pretty well today. The text was Matthew 14:22-33. You had let the story tell itself, focusing primarily on Peter's request to come to Jesus on the water, his few venturing steps, his fear, and Jesus' rescue of him. In the back of your mind as you prepared the sermon was that line in Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship*, where he writes that only the ones who believe are obedient, and only those who are obedient believe.¹ The departing members of the flock are especially generous in their appreciation of the sermon.

Then comes Joe Hendrix, a bit of a skeptic but not always getting things exactly right. He sticks out his hand and says, "Good sermon, preacher. But I wonder about this story in light of the stuff the Jesus Seminar folks are saying."

"What do you have mind?"

"Well, all through the sermon I kept wondering, did all this really happen? Is this a true story or not?"

"Yes, Joe, it's a true story, but you have to ask in what sense is it true."

"Well, I know now is not a good time, but I want to talk to you about it sometime. I will call you this week. It has always worried me, whether the stories in the Bible really happened."

And so you begin dreading this "have-to-have" conversation with Joe and wonder what to say to him. Joe is no fundamentalist. He is not stuck on the authority of scripture. He wouldn't be upset if you said that Jesus and Peter didn't walk on water. Instead it is the Jesus Seminar that has caught his interest. Last year he commented on the magazine articles about the red, pink, gray, and black balls scholars used to vote whether a saying in the Gospels can be traced back to Jesus or not. Joe mentioned that he listened to Frontline's series "From Jesus to Christ" and during the Christmas holidays saw A&E's Biography on "The Unknown Jesus," where the ubiquitous John Dominic Crossan was interviewed once again. Listening to those programs and reading these articles seem to have diverted him to these historical questions. Frankly, they are not burning issues for you. You don't look forward to the conversation with Joe.

For decades now preachers have recognized that the Gospels are theological documents written from thirty-five to sixty-five years after the death of Jesus. They are narratives, each written from and for a specific community with its own needs and concerns. Studying a Gospel text in preparation for next Sunday's sermon has meant taking a literary approach. It has entailed tracing the development of the characters within the passage, paying attention to the setting of the incident or teaching, the plot, the metaphors and images used, noticing where the story appears within the larger narrative of the book, and perhaps glancing at the community for which the passage was originally directed.

No doubt some parishioners, hearing the sermon that grows out of a literary

approach, simply assume that what the story relates is what actually occurred (i.e., that Jesus really walked on water or spoke the beatitudes, word for word, from a mountain). Others are a bit more sophisticated and recognize that the message of the *text* is what matters, not whether the evangelist gave us a blow-by-blow account of events as they happened or words as they were spoken. And then there is Joe, who seems to think that the truth of the story depends on whether the events really happened.

Of course the “faith and history” question is not a new one. The plethora of biographies of Jesus written in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries emerged out of an historical sensitivity that simply was not present earlier. Scholars were eager to liberate Jesus from the scholastic prison house in which the dogma of the church had confined him and to let history have its say. There were David Friedrich Strauss and Ernest Renan and a host of lesser lights, some of whom had a wide influence on the church. (Renan’s *Life of Jesus* in 1863 sold over 60,000 copies in France and was quickly translated into German, Italian, Dutch, and English. The full text is still available on the Internet.)

Then at the turn of the century along came Albert Schweitzer, who exposed two failings of the biographers of Jesus. First was their almost naïve tendency to reflect their own era or their personal interests in their presentations of Jesus (“There is no historical task which so reveals a man’s true self as the writing of a *Life of Jesus*.”²). About the Frenchman Renan’s book, Schweitzer commented, “The Gentle Jesus, the beautiful Mary, the fair Galileans who formed the retinue of ‘amiable carpenter,’ might have been taken over in a body from the shop-window of an ecclesiastical art emporium in the Place St. Suplice.”³ Second, Schweitzer called attention to the consistent failure of the biographers to come to grips with the apocalyptic character of Jesus’ life and teaching. Jesus’ sayings about the endtime had always seemed an embarrassment. Only Reimarus had given them adequate attention.

Almost contemporary with Schweitzer, Martin Kähler, a teacher of Paul Tillich and highly influential for Rudolf Bultmann, offered a more devastating critique of the biographers. Kähler had no time at all for the liberal lives of Jesus. He argued that the Gospels do not lend themselves as sources for composing such biographies. They do not provide tidbits of data that can be strung together to make a “life of Jesus.” They give no information that lets the reader into Jesus’ inner life and development, nor do they offer any help to penetrate to his self-consciousness. Instead, the Gospels are accounts of Jesus written from a post-Easter perspective by believing people who declared a crucified and risen Lord. The faith of the church rests not in a figure that the historians can uncover behind the Gospels but rather in the One whom the Gospels proclaim. As Kähler put it, “It is the task of the dogmatician, in defense of the plain Christian faith, to set limits to the learned pontificating of the historians.”⁴ The result was a complete divorce between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. Though there were some dissenting voices, mostly in Great Britain,⁵ in theological circles the arguments of Kähler, developed and refined by Bultmann and Barth, gained the upper hand.

Then in 1953 Ernst Käsemann, presenting a paper to a gathering of former Bultmann pupils, called for a reopening of the quest for the historical Jesus. Fully aware of the weaknesses of the old quest, Käsemann contended that to sever the earthly Jesus from the risen Lord was to fall into docetism and to forfeit the possibility of drawing a line between the Easter faith of the community and myth. The task then was

not to produce a biography of Jesus but, having accepted the sources as kerygmatic documents, to trace connections between what the earthly Jesus said and did and what the early church affirmed about him. "My own concern is to show that, out of the obscurity of the life story of Jesus, certain characteristic traits in his preaching stand out in relatively sharp relief, and that primitive Christianity united its own message with these."⁶

The "new quest" for the historical Jesus, which followed Käsemann's lead, was not enormously productive in terms of books about Jesus. The most widely read volume was Günther Bornkamm's *Jesus of Nazareth*, written in 1956 and translated into English in 1960. Bornkamm rejected any attempt to produce a biography in the usual sense of the term (i.e., no psychological or historical development, very little chronology), but he succeeded in stating a critical principle of method. Simply because a story of Jesus reflects the interests and language of the primitive Easter community does not mean that it should be dismissed as "inauthentic" or "a creation of the early church." "Our task is to seek the history *in* the Kerygma of the Gospels, and in this history to seek the Kerygma. If we are asked to differentiate between the two, that is only for the purpose of revealing more clearly their inter-connection and inter-penetration."⁷ "Understood in this way, the primitive tradition is brim full of history."⁸

The "new quest," while neither as productive as the nineteenth century quest⁹ nor as widely publicized as "the third quest," accomplished at least in part what it set out to do. For example, most historians would agree that one thing the earthly Jesus repeatedly did for certain was to eat with tax collectors and sinners. Such activity evoked a negative response from the religious leaders of the day and brought the accusation that he was a glutton and a drunkard (Matt 11:19). It was not a long step, then, for Paul to make from such behavior on Jesus' part to the confession that God in Christ justifies the ungodly (Rom 4:5; 5:6-8), which itself is an offense to righteous people. There is thus a connection between Jesus' welcome of sinners and God's gracious act of justification. It was such lines of continuity between the preaching and activity of the earthly Jesus and the faith of the early church that the "new quest" sought to investigate.¹⁰

Now a century after Schweitzer and Kähler we are confronted with "the third quest,"¹¹ including both those associated with the Jesus Seminar (such as Robert Funk, John Dominic Crossan, and Marcus Borg) and those unrelated to or even opposed to the Jesus Seminar (such as E. P. Sanders, John Meier, N. T. Wright, Dale Allison, and Luke T. Johnson).¹² Opinions vary widely about what sources are most appropriate, what criteria are to be used in determining authentic sayings of Jesus, how to relate Jesus' actions to his teaching, what basic portrait of Jesus emerges from the study, and to what extent faith is dependent on the results of the historian's conclusions. There is by no means a clear consensus, despite what Crossan might convey in his interviews. Johnson even contends that the whole project is misguided.¹³ The jury is still out.

Yet, undoubtedly "the third questers" have struck a sensitive nerve. Questions like the one from Joe Hendrix are in part due to the success the Jesus Seminar has had in catching the attention of the media and to the clear, forceful prose of a writer like Marcus Borg. But I suspect the questions also emerge from a serious searching on the part of believing people, from an existential curiosity: Who was this Jesus whom the church worships as Lord and Savior? Was he more than a character in a story? What was the quality of his life? What did he do that got him crucified? In what sense was

he really human?

It is interesting that through the period of the sixties, seventies, and eighties before the days of the Jesus Seminar, liberation theologians became very interested in what sort of a person Jesus really was. Their concern for the concrete praxis of faith quickly led them away from any christology that tended toward a universal abstraction and in favor of an understanding of Christ anchored in history. Jon Sobrino offers two reasons why it makes sense to begin with the historical Jesus. First, he discerns a noticeable resemblance between the situation in Latin America and the situation in which Jesus lived. It is not simply the poverty and exploitation that characterized first century life in Palestinian villages and that parallels his circumstances, but that such poverty and exploitation are “acutely felt and understood to be a sinful situation.” Second, the understandings of Jesus in the first Christian communities, while diverse, are not fabricated, but are generated by people who had been with Jesus from the baptism by John until his death (Acts 1:21-22).¹⁴

But if faith is basically a matter of trust in God revealed in the Christ of the Gospels, couldn't Kähler be right when he argues that honest believers cannot be left to the vagaries of historical research? In any case, whose historical conclusions are we to accept? The evangelical Wright or the skeptical Crossan?

Is faith essentially immune to the historian's investigations? Well, yes and no. It is certainly true that faith cannot look to the historian for vindication, to bolster an otherwise shaky foundation and make it more believable. If historians could unanimously agree that all the events in the Gospels happened just the way they are reported (which of course they can't), it would not remove the scandal of the cross or make believing one whit easier.

Charles Carlston puts it well:

No matter what historical question is asked about Jesus of Nazareth, or how sophisticated the methods of dealing with the available data may be, the *most* that historical methods could yield would be indications that Jesus was, so to speak, at the top end of the human scale in some way—the noblest of human beings, the most trusting, the most fully committed to human liberation in the name of God, and so on. But the leap from even that extreme conclusion to a conviction about Jesus' significance on the divine side of the balance (“very God of very God”) is not a matter of degree and could never be justified on historical grounds.¹⁵

In this regard at least, Kähler is right. Human faith depends on the faithfulness of God shown in the crucified and risen Jesus and not on what historians can confirm about what Jesus said or didn't say, what he did or didn't do.

On the other hand, historical research does hold the potential for falsifying faith. Suppose the historians unanimously concluded (which of course they won't) that Jesus died in old age of natural causes; then the whole meaning of his life and death is up for grabs; Paul's theology is emasculated; and we are left with an inoffensive message of trivial love. Faith, therefore, has something at stake in the historical investigations of Jesus. To quote Carlston again,

The pairing of the “Jesus of history” and the “Christ of faith,” to be sure, is

nonsense except from the standpoint of faith, which presumes that the Christ of faith (risen Lord, post-resurrection Jesus, etc.) has some meaning. From that standpoint, however, affirmations about the present significance of Jesus/Christ almost inevitably raise questions about the relationship between those affirmations and the Jesus whose historical reality can be approximated by historical study. What otherwise is being affirmed?¹⁶

The church has always confessed that God's revelation came in a specific human being, Jesus the Jew of Nazareth ("the scandal of particularity"), and at a designated time in history ("suffered under Pontius Pilate"). A faith that claims it is rooted in history of necessity must be open to the risk of historical investigation. Historians then have not only the right but also the responsibility of bringing their best methods and resources to consider the life and character of a person such as Jesus.¹⁷

For example, who was responsible for the death of Jesus, and why? What was the nature of his threat to both Romans and Jews that led to the decision to do away with him? Was it simply his challenge to the Jewish law that led the religious authorities to persuade Pilate to crucify him? Or was Jesus such a politically subversive figure that he posed a serious problem for the Romans? Recent studies of the social, political, economic situation of first century Palestinians, particularly of Galilee, the growing understanding of the beliefs and practices of Second Temple Judaism, and the impact of the Roman presence in a client state like Israel have light to shed on this significant issue. At their best they may offer no more than approximations, but approximations that can stretch and enrich faith.

Okay, but what do you say to Joe? Maybe just two items are critical. Setting aside the pastoral concerns for a moment, you want him to understand what is meant by the term "the historical Jesus." It designates not Jesus as he really was, but the Jesus whom historians can reconstruct by applying their methods and sifting through their sources. In a sense their reconstruction of Jesus is always reductionistic. Of necessity, they have to be skeptical, to query the Gospels as they would other sources, and to challenge widely held opinions. They have to deal with verifiable reality, with cause and effect relationships. At the same time, whether they like it or not, they have to lay out their conclusions for others to evaluate. This is precisely what is happening now with the findings of the Jesus Seminar. Their conclusions are being critiqued and challenged. One cannot even keep up with the book titles, much less the articles.

After this, you want Joe to understand that the historian's work won't make it any easier to be a Christian, nor does it help much in interpreting the Bible for preaching. If, instead of last Sunday's sermon, you had presented an airtight case that Jesus and Peter really did walk on water and even had convinced the congregation that they had, it wouldn't have been the gospel you proclaimed. The Christian message has at its heart the story of God's presence and activity in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It is this story which Paul calls a "new creation" (Gal 6:15; 2 Cor 5:17). Maybe the best you could do is to leave Joe with this quote from Paul Meyer:

"To be a Christian" must now be much more like doing what the sources in fact do, looking back on Jesus' life and his death, and understanding, on the grounds of God's vindication of that whole, that the world is a different place because of it.¹⁸

Notes

- ¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 54.
- ² Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (New York: Macmillan, 1961, reprint), 4.
- ³ Schweitzer, 182.
- ⁴ Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964; translated from the 1896 German edition), 73.
- ⁵ For example, D. M. Baillie, *God Was in Christ: Essays on Incarnation and Atonement* (London: Faber and Faber, 1948).
- ⁶ Ernst Käsemann, "The Problem of the Historical Jesus," in *Essays on New Testament Themes*, SBT (London: SCM, 1964; translated from the 1960 German edition), 46.
- ⁷ Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1960), 21.
- ⁸ Bornkamm, 26.
- ⁹ Why the "new quest" did not receive a wide hearing in English-speaking countries may have been due to the heaviness of the discussion (see e.g., Ernst Fuchs, *Studies of the Historical Jesus*, SBT (London: SCM, 1964; translated from 1960 German edition) and James M. Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus*, SBT (London: SCM, 1959). The most significant American contributions were an attempt to reconstruct what Jesus said by Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967) and a theological analysis by Leander E. Keck, *A Future for the Historical Jesus: The Place of Jesus in Preaching and in History* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971).
- ¹⁰ One of the most suggestive contributions to christology to come from the "new quest" was the notion that just as Jesus' telling of the parables confronted listeners with the kingdom of God so Jesus himself is the Parable of God. See Keck, 208-259.
- ¹¹ The expression "third quest" seems to have originated with Wright. See N. T. Wright and Stephen Neill, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1986* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, 2nd edition), 379-403.
- ¹² The most accurate and most accessible survey of "the third quest" I know of is by Mark Allen Powell, *Jesus as a Figure in History: How Modern Historians View the Man from Galilee* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998).
- ¹³ Luke T. Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).
- ¹⁴ Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1978), 10-14.
- ¹⁵ Charles E. Carlston, "Prologue," in *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of the Research*, eds. Bruce Chilton and C. A. Evans (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 5.
- ¹⁶ Carlston, 6.
- ¹⁷ The church must always be sensitive to the possibility that under the historian's research lies a hidden christology that requires neither resurrection nor canon nor creed. When this happens, a reconstructed Jesus supplants the crucified and risen Christ as the object of faith, and the historian subtly replaces the canon. See the perceptive critique of Crossan by M. Eugene Boring, "The 'Third Quest' and the Apostolic Faith," *Int* 50 (1996): 346-352.
- ¹⁸ Paul W. Meyer, "Faith and History Revisited," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 10 (1989): 77.