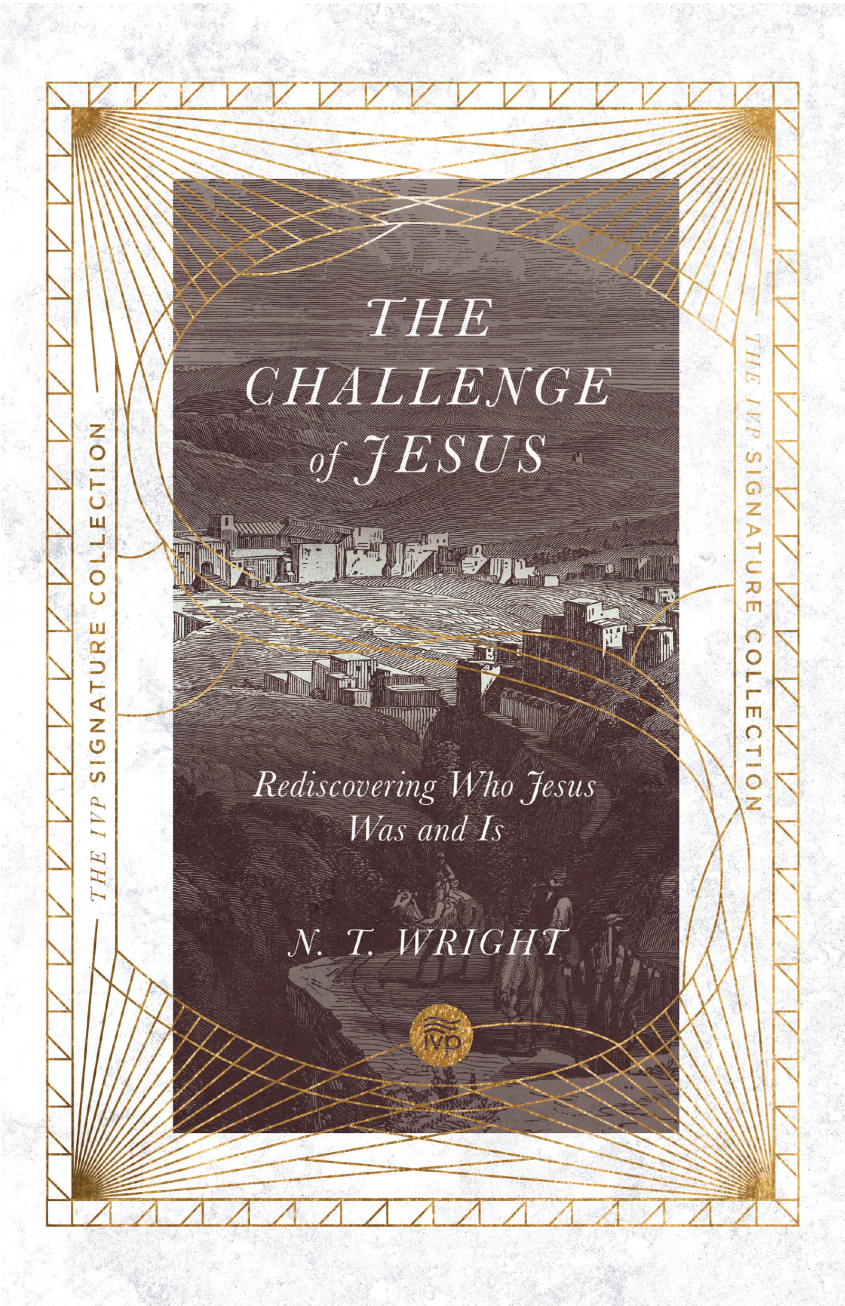


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# CHAPTER ONE

# THE CHALLENGE OF STUDYING JESUS

A *FRIEND OF MINE, LECTURING IN A THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE IN KENYA,* introduced his students to "The Quest for the Historical Jesus." This, he said, was a movement of thought and scholarship that in its earlier forms was carried on largely in Germany in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He had not gone far into his lecture explaining this search for Jesus when one of his students interrupted him. "Teacher," he said ("I knew I was in trouble," my friend commented, "as soon as he called me 'teacher'!"), "if the Germans have lost Jesus, that is their problem. We have not lost him. We know him. We love him."

Research into Jesus himself has long been controversial, not least among devout Christians. Several people in the wider Christian world wonder if there is anything new to say about Jesus and if the attempt to say something fresh is not a denial either of the church's traditional teaching or of the sufficiency of Scripture. I want to grasp this nettle right away and explain why I regard it, not just as permissible but as vitally necessary that we grapple afresh with the question of who Jesus was and therefore who he is. In doing so I in no way want to

deny or undermine the knowledge of Jesus of which the Kenyan student spoke and which is the common experience of the church down the centuries and across widely differing cultures. I see the historical task, rather, as part of the appropriate activity of knowledge and love, to get to know even better the one whom we claim to know and follow. If even in a human relationship of knowledge and love there can be misunderstandings, false impressions, wrong assumptions, which need to be teased out and dealt with, how much more when the one to whom we are relating is Jesus himself.

I believe, in fact, that the historical quest for Jesus is a necessary and nonnegotiable aspect of Christian discipleship and that we in our generation have a chance to be renewed in discipleship and mission precisely by means of this quest. I want to explain and justify these beliefs from the outset. There are, however, huge problems and even dangers within the quest, as one would expect from anything that is heavy with potential for the kingdom of God, and I shall need to say something about these as well.

There are well-known pitfalls in even addressing the subject, and we may as well be clear about them. It is desperately easy when among like-minded friends to become complacent. We hear of wild new theories about Jesus. Every month or two some publisher comes up with a blockbuster saying that he was a New Age guru, an Egyptian freemason or a hippie revolutionary. Every year or two some scholar or group of scholars comes up with a new book full of imposing footnotes to tell us that Jesus was a peasant Cynic, a wandering wordsmith or the preacher of liberal values born out of due time.

The day I was redrafting this chapter for publication, a newspaper article appeared about a new controversy, initiated by animal-rights activists, as to whether Jesus was a vegetarian.

We may well react to all this sort of thing by saying that it is all a waste of time, that we know all we need to know about Jesus, and

there is no more to be said. Many devout Christians taking this line content themselves with an effortless superiority: we know the truth, these silly liberals have got it all wrong, and we have nothing new to learn. Sometimes people like me are wheeled out to demonstrate, supposedly, the truth of "traditional Christianity," with the implied corollary that we can now stop asking these unpleasant historical questions and get on with something else, perhaps something more profitable, instead.

Some, however, react by reaching for equally misleading alternative stereotypes. A defense of a would-be "supernatural" Jesus can easily degenerate into a portrayal of Jesus as a first-century version of Superman—not realizing that the Superman myth is itself ultimately a dualistic corruption of the Christian story. There are several Jesus-pictures on offer that appear very devout but that ignore what the New Testament actually says about the human being Jesus of Nazareth or what it meant in its original context.

I do not intend to encourage any of these attitudes. I repeat: I regard the continuing historical quest for Jesus as a necessary part of ongoing Christian discipleship. I doubt very much if in the present age we shall ever get to the point where we know all there is to know and understand all there is to understand about Jesus, who he was, what he said and what he did, and what he meant by it all. But since orthodox Christianity has always held firm to the basic belief that it is by looking at Jesus himself that we discover who God is, it seems to me indisputable that we should expect always to be continuing in the quest for Jesus precisely as part of, indeed perhaps as the sharp edge of, our exploration into God himself.

This, of course, carries certain corollaries. If it is true that Christian faith cannot preempt the historical questions about Jesus, it is also true that historical study cannot be carried out in a vacuum. We have been taught by the Enlightenment to suppose that history and faith are antithetical, so that to appeal to the one is to appeal away from the

other. As a result, historians have regularly been suspect in the community of faith, just as believers have always been suspect in the community of secular historiography. When Christianity is truest to itself, however, it denies precisely this dichotomy—uncomfortable though this may be for those of us who try to live in and to speak from and to both communities simultaneously. Actually, I believe this discomfort is itself one aspect of a contemporary Christian vocation: as our world goes through the deep pain of the death throes of the Enlightenment, the Christian is not called to stand apart from this pain but to share it. I shall say more about this in the concluding chapter. I am neither a secular historian who happens to believe in Jesus nor a Christian who happens to indulge a fancy for history. Rather, I am someone who believes that being a Christian necessarily entails doing business with history and that history done for all it's worth will challenge spurious versions of Christianity, including many that think of themselves as orthodox, while sustaining and regenerating a deep and true orthodoxy, surprising and challenging though this will always remain.[1]

Let me then move to the positive side. What are the reasons that make it imperative for us to study Jesus?

**The Necessity of the Quest**

The most basic reason for grappling with the historical question of Jesus is that we are made for God: for God's glory, to worship God and reflect his likeness. That is our heart's deepest desire, the source of our deepest vocation. But Christianity has always said, with John 1:18, that nobody has ever seen God but that Jesus has revealed God. We shall only discover who the true and living God actually is if we take the risk of looking at Jesus himself. That is why the contemporary debates about Jesus are so important; they are also debates about God himself.

The second reason why I engage in serious historical study of Jesus

is out of loyalty to Scripture. This may seem deeply ironic to some on both sides of the old liberal-conservative divide. Many Jesus scholars of the last two centuries have of course thrown Scripture out of the window and reconstructed a Jesus quite different from what we find in the New Testament. But the proper answer to that approach is not simply to reassert that because we believe in the Bible we do not need to ask fresh questions about Jesus. As with God so with the Bible; just because our tradition tells us that the Bible says and means one thing or another, that does not excuse us from the challenging task of studying it afresh in the light of the best knowledge we have about its world and context, to see whether these things are indeed so. For me the dynamic of a commitment to Scripture is not "we believe the Bible, so there is nothing more to be learned," but rather "we believe the Bible, so we had better discover all the things in it to which our traditions, including our 'protestant' or 'evangelical' traditions, which have supposed themselves to be 'biblical' but are sometimes demonstrably not, have made us blind." And this process of rethinking will include the hard and often threatening question of whether some things that our traditions have taken as "literal" should be seen as "metaphorical," and perhaps also vice versa—and, if so, which ones.

This leads to the third reason, which is the Christian imperative to truth. Christians must not be afraid of truth. Of course, that is what many reductionists have said, as with apparent boldness they have whittled down the meaning of the gospel to a few bland platitudes, leaving the sharp and craggy message of Jesus far behind. That is not my agenda. My agenda is to go deeper into the meaning than we have before and to come back to a restatement of the gospel that grounds the things we have believed about Jesus, about the cross, about the resurrection, about the incarnation, more deeply within their original setting. When I say the great Christian creeds—as I do day-by-day in worship—I mean them from the heart, but I find that after twenty years of historical study I mean something much deeper, much more

challenging, than I meant when I started. I cannot compel my readers to follow me in this particular pilgrimage, but I can and do hold out an invitation to see Jesus, the Gospels, ourselves, the world and, above all, God in what may well be a new and perhaps disturbing light.

The fourth reason for undertaking the study of Jesus is because of the Christian commitment to mission. The mission of most Christians likely to read this book takes place in a world where Jesus has been a hot topic for several years now. In America particularly, Jesus—and the quest for him—has been featured in *Time* magazine, on television and elsewhere in the media. And the people whom ordinary Christians meet, to whom they must address the gospel, have been told over and over by the media, on the basis of some recent book or other, that the Jesus of the Gospels is historically incredible and that Christianity is therefore based on a mistake. It simply will not do to declare this question out-of-bounds, to say that the church's teaching will do for us, thank you very much, so we do not need to ask historical questions. You cannot say that to a serious and enquiring person who engages you in conversation on a train or to someone who wanders into a church one Sunday and asks what it is all about. If Christianity is not rooted in things that actually happened in first-century Palestine, we might as well be Buddhists, Marxists or almost anything else. And if Jesus never existed, or if he was quite different from what the Gospels and the church's worship affirms him to have been, then we are indeed living in cloud-cuckoo-land. The skeptics can and must be answered, and when we do so we will not merely reaffirm the traditions of the church, whether Protestant, Catholic, evangelical or whatever. We will be driven to reinterpret them, discovering depths of meaning within them that we had never imagined.

One of the reasons why we had not imagined some of the depths that, I believe, are actually there to be found lies in our own historical and cultural setting. I am a first-century historian, not a Reformation or eighteenth-century specialist. Nevertheless, from what little I know

of the last five hundred years of European and American history, I believe that we can categorize the challenge of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment to historic Christianity in terms of its *asking a necessary question in a misleading fashion*. The divide in contemporary Christianity between liberals and conservatives has tended to be between those who, because they saw the necessity of asking the historical question, assumed that it had to be asked in the Enlightenment's fashion and those on the other hand who, because they saw the misleadingness of the Enlightenment's way of asking the question, assumed that the historical question was itself unnecessary. Let me speak first of the necessity of the Enlightenment's question and then of the misleading way it has been addressed.

To understand why the Enlightenment's historical question was necessary we need to take a further step back to the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. The protest of the Reformation against the medieval church was not least a protest in favor of a *historical* and *eschatological* reading of Christianity against a timeless system. Getting at the literal *historical* meaning of the texts, as the Reformers insisted we must, meant historical reading: the question of what Jesus or Paul really meant, as opposed to what the much-later church said they meant, became dramatically important. Go back to the beginning, they said, and you will discover that the developed system of Roman Catholicism is based on a mistake. This supported the Reformers' *eschatological* emphasis: the cross was God's once-for-all achievement, never to be repeated, as the Reformers saw their Catholic opponents doing in the Mass. But, arguably, the Reformers never allowed this basic insight to drive them beyond a halfway house when it came to Jesus himself. The Gospels were still treated as the repositories of true doctrine and ethics. Insofar as they were history, they were the history of the moment when the timeless truth of God was grounded in space and time, when the action that accomplished the timeless atonement just happened to take place. This, I know, is a

gross oversimplification, but I believe it is borne out by the sequel. Post-Reformation theology grasped the insights of the reformers as a new set of timeless truths and used them to set up new systems of dogma, ethics and church order in which, once again, vested interests were served and fresh thought was stifled.

The Enlightenment was, among many other things, a protest against a system that, since it was itself based on a protest, could not see that it was itself in need of further reform. (The extent to which the Enlightenment was a secularized version of the Reformation is a fascinating question, one for brave Ph.D. candidates to undertake rather than the subject for a book like this. But we have to do business at least with these possibilities if we are to grasp where we have come from and hence where we may be being called to go to.) In particular, the Enlightenment, in the person of Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768), challenged unthinking would-be Christian dogma about the eternal son of God and his establishment of the oppressive system called "Christianity." Reimarus challenged it in the name of history—the same weapon that the reformers had used against Roman Catholicism. Go back to the beginning, he said, and you will discover that Christianity is based on a mistake. Jesus was, after all, another in a long line of failed Jewish revolutionaries. Christianity as we know it was the invention of the early disciples.[2]

I believe that Reimarus's question was necessary. *Necessary* to shake European Christianity out of its dogmatism and to face a new challenge—to grow in understanding of who Jesus actually was and what he actually accomplished. *Necessary* to challenge bland dogma with a living reality; *necessary* to challenge idolatrous distortions of who Jesus actually was and hence who God actually was and is, with a fresh grasp of truth. The fact that Reimarus gave his own question an answer that is historically unsustainable does not mean he did not ask the right questions. Who was Jesus, and what did he accomplish?

This necessity has been underlined in our own century, as Ernst

Käsemann saw all too clearly. Look what happens, he said in a famous lecture in 1953, when the church abandons the quest for Jesus. The nonquesting years between the wars created a vacuum in which nonhistorical Jesuses were offered, legitimating the Nazi ideology. I would go so far as to suggest that whenever the church forgets its call to engage in the task of understanding more and more fully who Jesus actually was, idolatry and ideology lie close at hand. To renounce the quest because you do not like what the historians have so far come up with is not a solution.

But the Enlightenment's raising of the question of Jesus was done in a radically misleading manner, which still has profound effects on the research of today. The Enlightenment notoriously insisted on splitting apart history and faith, facts and values, religion and politics, nature and supernature, in a way whose consequences are written into the history of the last two hundred years—one of the consequences being, indeed, that each of those categories now carries with it in the minds of millions of people around the world an implicit opposition to its twin, so that we are left with the great difficulty of even conceiving of a world in which they belong to one another as part of a single indivisible whole. Again, so much debate between *liberals* and *conservatives* has taken place down this fault line (history *or* faith, religion *or* politics and so on), while the real battle—the challenge to rearticulate a reintegrated worldview—has not even been attempted. But there is a deeper problem with the Enlightenment than its radically split worldview. The real problem is that it offered a rival *eschatology* to the Christian one. This needs a little explanation.

Christianity, as we shall see, began with the thoroughly Jewish belief that world history was focused on a single geographical place and a single moment in time. The Jews assumed that their country and their capital city was the place in question, and that the time, though they did not know quite when it would be, would be soon. The living God would defeat evil once and for all and create a new

world of peace and justice. The early Christians believed that this had in principle happened in and through Jesus of Nazareth; as we shall see, they believed this (a) because Jesus himself had believed it and (b) because he had been vindicated by God after his execution. This is what early Christian eschatology was all about: not the expectation of the literal end of the space-time universe but the sense that world history was reaching, or indeed had reached, its single intended climax.

This, as we saw, was grasped in principle by the Reformers. Martin Luther, it is true, used the captivity and exile of Israel in Babylon as a controlling metaphor for his understanding of church history, in which the church, like Israel, had been suffering a "Babylonian captivity" for many centuries until his own day. But his strong focus on Jesus himself prevented this from becoming a new rival eschatology, divorced from its first-century roots. Even though Luther saw his own day as a special time in which God was doing a new thing, this remained for him strictly derivative: the real new day had dawned, once and for all, with Jesus himself. His own new "great light" did not upstage the Light of the World himself.

With the Enlightenment, however, this further step was taken. All that had gone before was a form of captivity, of darkness; now, at last, light and freedom had dawned. World history was finally brought to its climax, its real new beginning, not in Jerusalem but in Western Europe and America, not in the first century but in the eighteenth. (We may perhaps be allowed a wry smile at the way in which post-Enlightenment thinkers to this day heap scorn upon the apparently ridiculous idea that world history reached its climax in Jerusalem two thousand years ago, while themselves holding a view we already know to be at least equally ridiculous.) Thus, as long as the necessary question of the Enlightenment (the question of the historical Jesus) was addressed within the Enlightenment's own terms, it was inevitable not only that christology would collapse into warring camps of naturalist and

supernaturalist—in other words, that Jesus-pictures would be produced in which the central character was either an unexceptional first-century Jew or an inhuman and improbable superman-figure—but also that liberal and conservative alike would find it hugely difficult to reconceive the first-century Jewish eschatological world within which alone the truly historical Jesus belongs. Jesus was almost bound to appear as the teacher of either liberal timeless truths or conservative timeless truths. The thought that he might have been the turning point of history was, to many on both sides of the divide, almost literally unthinkable. Even Albert Schweitzer, who brought the eschatological perspective back with a bang to the study of Jesus, radically misunderstood it.

Schweitzer did, however, alert Christian thinkers to something that has taken almost a century to assimilate: that the world in which Jesus lived, and which he addressed with his message about the kingdom, was a world in which the Jewish expectation of God's climactic and decisive action within history was uppermost. It is this, I believe, that has given fresh impetus to the study of Jesus and makes it imperative that we engage in this study. Properly conceived, Schweitzer's answer to Reimarus's question—that Jesus belongs within the world of this first-century Jewish expectation—enables us to see that by engaging in the study of Jesus himself we can understand much better—better indeed than the Reformers—what it meant within Jesus' own world that God would act in a one-off, unique way, generating a response that would not be a repetition of that initial act but rather the appropriation and implementation of it.

I believe, then, that within the multiple tasks to which God is calling the church in our own generation, there remains the necessary task of addressing the Enlightenment's question as to who precisely Jesus was and what precisely he accomplished. And I believe that there are ways of addressing this question that do not fall into the trap of merely rearranging the Enlightenment's own categories. We have a new

opportunity in our generation to move forward in our thinking, our praying, our whole Christian living, no doubt by many means, but not least by addressing the question of the historical Jesus in fresh and creative ways.

All of this drives me to explore the human, historical, cultural and political setting and meaning of what the Gospels say about Jesus. This ought not to be seen by orthodox Christians as a threat. Granted, the contemporary orthodox Christian tradition to which I and many of my readers have fallen heir was conceived and stated against a background of modernist and secularist reductionism. In that setting it was vital to affirm, as orthodox Christians have regularly done in the last two centuries or so, the God-givenness of Scripture, the divinity of Jesus and so on. But our earlier forebears in the faith were well-aware that there were errors in the opposite direction as well—patterns of belief and behavior that saw Jesus as a demigod, not really human at all, striding through the world as a divine, heroic figure, untroubled by human questions, never wrestling with vocation, aware of himself as someone from outside the whole system, telling people how they might escape the wicked world and live forever in a different realm altogether. This is the worldview out of which there grew—and still grows—gnosticism, that many-sided system of thought and spirituality in which a secret knowledge *(gnosis)* can be attained that will enable humans to rediscover their lost secret identity and thereby, escaping the present world, enjoy bliss in an entirely different sphere of reality.

Gnosticism in one or other of its many forms has been making a huge comeback in our day. Sometimes this has been explicit, as for instance in the New Age movements and similar spiritualities that encourage people to discover who they *really* are. Just as often, though, gnosticism of a different sort has been on offer within would-be mainstream traditional orthodoxy, as many Christians have embraced a Jesus who only *seemed* to be human, have read a Bible that only

*seemed* to have human authors, have looked for a salvation in which God's created order became quite irrelevant, a salvation thought of in almost entirely dualist fashion. Woe betide us if, in our commitment to winning yesterday's battles against reductionist versions of Christianity, we fail to engage in tomorrow's, which might be quite different.

**New Opportunities in the Quest**

But why then should we suppose that there is anything new to say about Jesus? This is a question I am often asked, not least by journalists on the one hand and by puzzled, nonacademically inclined Christians on the other. The answer, actually, is that there both is and is not. Mere novelty is almost bound to be wrong: if you try to say that Jesus did not announce the kingdom of God or that he was in fact a twentieth-century thinker born out of due time, you will rightly be rejected. But what did Jesus mean by the kingdom of God? That and a thousand other cognate questions are far harder than often supposed, and the place to go to find new light is the history of Jesus' own time. And that means first-century Judaism, in all its complexity and with all the ambiguities of our attempts to reconstruct it.

There are, of course, all sorts of new tools available to help us to do this. We have the Dead Sea Scrolls, all of them at last in the public domain. We have good new editions of dozens of hitherto hard-to-find Jewish texts, and a burgeoning secondary literature about them. We have all kinds of archaeological finds, however complex they may be to interpret. Of course, there is always the danger both of oversimplification and overcomplication. Our sources do not enable us to draw a complete sociological map of Galilee and Judaea in Jesus' day. But we know enough to be able to say quite a lot, for instance, about the agenda of the Pharisees; quite a lot, too, about what sort of aspirations came to be enshrined in what we call apocalyptic literature and why; quite a lot, too, about Roman agendas in Palestine and the agendas of

the chief priests and the Herodian dynasty in their insecure struggles for a compromised power. Quite a lot, in other words, about the necessary contexts for understanding Jesus.

We can perhaps say something, too, about Galilean peasants. Not, I think, everything that some current writers would like us to. There are those who see the peasant culture of ancient Mediterranean society as the dominant influence in the Galilee of Jesus' day, with the Jewish apocalyptic coloring decidedly muted; so that Jesus' announcement of the kingdom has less to do with specifically Jewish aspirations and more to do with the kind of social protest that might arise in any culture.[3] Let me stress *both* that this is a mistake *and* that showing it to be so does not lessen the element of social protest that is still to be found within the much wider-ranging and more theologically grounded kingdom-announcement that we can properly attribute to Jesus. Equally, I emphasize that one of the things we can know about peasant societies like that of Jesus is that they were heavily dependent upon oral traditions, not least traditions of instant storytelling. When we get this right, we avoid at a stroke some of the extraordinary reductionism that has characterized the so-called Jesus Seminar, with its attempt to rule out the authenticity of most Jesus-stories on the grounds that people would only have remembered isolated sayings, not complete stories.[4] But my overall point is simply this: there is a great deal of history writing still waiting to be attempted and accomplished, and we have more tools to do it with than most of us can keep up with. If we really believe in any sense in the incarnation of the Word, we are bound to take seriously the flesh that the Word became. And since that flesh was first-century Jewish flesh, we should rejoice in any and every advance in our understanding of first-century Judaism and seek to apply those insights to our reading of the Gospels.

And we do so, we must insist, not in order to undermine what the Gospels are saying or to replace their stories with quite different ones of our own, but to understand what it is that they are really all about.

It is a standard objection to historical-Jesus research to say that God has given us the Gospels and that we cannot and should not put a construction of our own in their place. But this misunderstands the nature of the task. Precisely because these texts have been read and preached as holy Scripture for two thousand years, all kinds of misunderstandings have crept in, which have then been enshrined in church tradition. The historian will often see not necessarily that the Gospels need to be rejected or replaced but that they did not in fact mean what subsequent Christian tradition thought.

Let me take an obvious example that will be of further interest as our topic proceeds. Martin Luther rightly reacted against the medieval translation of *metanoeite* as *paenitentiam agere* ("do penance") and insisted that the word referred originally to the "repentance" that takes place deep within the human heart, not in the outward actions prescribed as a quasi-punishment. He could not know that his reading would be used, in turn, to support an individualistic and pietistic reading of Jesus' command to repent, which does no justice at all to the meaning of the word in the first century. Jesus was summoning his hearers to give up their whole way of life, their national and social agendas, and to trust him for a different agenda, a different set of goals. This of course included a change of heart, but went far beyond it.[5]

This illustrates a point that could be repeated dozens of times. Historical research, as I have tried to show in various places, by no means tells us to throw away the Gospels and substitute a quite different story of our own. It does, however, warn us that our familiar readings of those Gospel stories may well have to submit to serious challenges and questionings and that we may end up reading even our favorite texts in ways we had never imagined. Since this agenda is thus truly Protestant, truly Catholic, truly evangelical and truly liberal, not to mention potentially charismatic as well, those in all kinds of streams within the church should be able to embrace it as

their own. It takes a certain courage, of course, to be prepared to read familiar texts in new ways. It is abundantly worth it. What you lose in terms of your regular readings will be more than made up for in what you will gain.

**False Trails in the Quest**

In order to understand where we are in the bewildering options in today's quest, it helps to see the state of play a hundred years ago.[6] Three figures stand out. William Wrede argued for consistent skepticism: we cannot know very much about Jesus, he certainly did not think of himself as the Messiah or the Son of God, and the Gospels are basically theological fiction. Albert Schweitzer argued for consistent eschatology: Jesus shared the first-century apocalyptic expectation of the end of all things, and though he died without it having come about, he started the eschatological movement that became Christianity. What is more, the Synoptic Gospels more or less got him right. Over against both these positions Martin Kähler argued that the quest for a purely historical Jesus was based on a mistake since the real figure at the heart of Christianity was the preached and believed Christ of the church's faith, not some figment of the historian's imagination.

All three positions are alive and well as we come to the end of the twentieth century. The Jesus Seminar and several writers of a similar stamp stand in the line of Wrede. Sanders, Meyer, Harvey and several others, myself included, stand in the line of Schweitzer. Luke Timothy Johnson is our contemporary Kähler, calling down a plague on all the houses.[7] Since I have been criticized, sometimes quite sharply, for offering this sort of analysis of the current state of play, I want to say a word or two of explanation and perhaps even justification.

Schweitzer's construction of Jesus, as is well-known, was so unwelcome to the theological establishment that there followed half a century of little serious Jesus-research. The so-called New Quest of the

1950s and 1960s made some progress at getting things started again but never really managed to recover a serious historical nerve. Books and articles spent more time arguing about criteria for authenticity than offering major hypotheses about Jesus himself. By the mid-1970s there was a sense of stalemate. It was then that quite a new style of Jesus historiography began to emerge, explicitly distinguishing itself from the so-called New Quest. For my money, the best book of that period was Ben Meyer's *The Aims of Jesus*,[8] which received less notice than it should have precisely because it broke the normal mold—and perhaps because it made quite heavy demands on a New Testament scholarly world unused to thinking through its own presuppositions and methods with high philosophical rigor. Six years after Meyer, E. P. Sanders's *Jesus and Judaism*[9] continued the trend. Both books rejected the New Quest's methods; both offered reconstructions of Jesus that made thorough and sustained use of Jewish apocalyptic eschatology; both offered fully blown hypotheses that made a fair amount of sense within first-century Judaism, rather than the bits-and-pieces reconstruction based on a small collection of supposedly authentic but isolated sayings, characteristic of the New Quest.

In this light I suggested in the early 1980s that we were witnessing what I called a "third quest" for Jesus. Despite the way the phrase has sometimes been used since, it was not intended as a blanket term for all 1980s and 1990s Jesus research. It was a way of distinguishing between the new wave I have just described and the continuing New Quest. The events of the last twenty years have, I believe, amply confirmed my judgment. What Meyer, Sanders and several others were doing was significantly different, in several ways that can be laid out unambiguously and reasonably noncontroversially, from the Old Quest of the pre-Schweitzer days and from the New Quest started by Ernst Käsemann and chronicled notably by James M. Robinson.[10] In this light when the Jesus Seminar, then J. Dominic Crossan and then particularly Robert Funk himself, the founder and chair of the Jesus

Seminar, explicitly continued the work of the New Quest, in Funk's case making quite a point of doing so,[11] I believe that I am justified in continuing to distinguish these movements in this way. Of course, contemporary history refuses to stand still and be cut up into neat pieces. Several writers cross over the boundaries this way and that. But I persist both in maintaining the distinction between the Wrede route and the Schweitzer route and in arguing that the latter offers the best hope for serious historical reconstruction.

I have argued in detail against the Jesus Seminar and Crossan in particular in various places, and it would be tedious to repeat such arguments here. But I want to make it clear that if I disagree with Crossan, Funk and the Jesus Seminar, and in different ways with Marcus Borg, as I do, it is not because I think they are wrong to raise the questions they do but because I believe their presuppositions, methods, arguments and conclusions can be successfully controverted on good historical grounds, not by appealing to theological a prioris. It is not enough, nor would it be true, to dismiss such writers as a bunch of disaffected liberals or unbelievers. We must engage in actual arguments about actual issues.

One of the best arguments, however, is the offering of an alternative hypothesis that actually does the job that a successful hypothesis must: make sense of the data, do so with an essential simplicity, and shed light on other areas.[12] It is to that task that we shall presently turn. But let me conclude this chapter with an appeal for others not just to read as interested outsiders about this task, but actually to engage in it themselves.

I have argued that the historical quest for Jesus is necessary for the health of the church. I grieve that in the church both in England and in America there seem to be so few—among a church that is otherwise so well-educated in so many spheres, with more educational resources and helps than ever before—who are prepared to give the time and attention to these questions that they deserve. I long for the day when

seminarians will again take delight in the detailed and fascinated study of the first century. If that century was not the moment when history reached its great climax, the church is simply wasting its time.

This is not a task simply for a few backroom specialists. If church leaders themselves spent more time studying and teaching Jesus and the Gospels, a good many of the other things we worry about in day-to-day church life would be seen in their proper light. It has far too often been assumed that church leaders stand above the nitty-gritty of biblical and theological study; they have done all that, we implicitly suppose, before they come to office, and now they simply have to work out the "implications." They then find themselves spending countless hours at their desks running the church as a business, raising money or working at dozens of other tasks, rather than poring over their foundation documents and enquiring ever more closely about the Jesus whom they are supposed to be following and teaching others to follow. I believe, to the contrary, that each generation has to wrestle afresh with the *question* of Jesus, not least its biblical roots if it is to be truly the church at all—not that we should engage in abstract dogmatics to the detriment of our engagement with the world, but that we should discover more and more of who Jesus was and is, precisely in order to be equipped to engage with the world that he came to save. And this is a task for the whole church, especially those appointed to leadership and teaching roles within it.

All our historical study, then, must be done to energize the church in its mission to the world. This is not to say that we are not open to following the argument wherever it goes or that we are not open to reading all texts, both canonical and noncanonical, which may help us in following the historical trail. On the contrary. It is because we believe we are called to be the people of God for the world that we must take the full historical task with utter seriousness. Study all the evidence; think through all the arguments. I am proud to be part of one particular ecclesial tradition, that of the Anglican or Episcopalian

church, that has a long and noble history of doing just that (though in recent years this tradition has often been somewhat muted). It has been part of that tradition at its best that it is prepared to think things through afresh—something that other traditions, not least those that think of themselves as "Protestant" or "evangelical," would do well to emulate.

But as we do this, we must remind ourselves again and again—as the liturgies of the traditional churches do in so many ways—that when we are telling the story of Jesus, we are doing so as part of the community that is called to model this story to the world. The more I take part in the quest for Jesus, the more I am challenged by it both as an individual and as a churchman. This is not because what I find undermines traditional orthodoxy, but precisely because the rich, full-blooded orthodoxy I find bubbling up from the pages of history poses challenges to me personally and to all the congregations I know. These challenges are extremely demanding, precisely because they are gospel challenges, kingdom challenges. At this point, being a Quester is simply the same thing as being a disciple. It means taking up the cross and following wherever Jesus leads. And the good and the bad news is that only when we do that will we show that we have truly understood the history. Only when we do that will people take our arguments, whether historical or theological, seriously. Only when we do that will we be the means whereby the Quest, which started so ambiguously as part of the Enlightenment program, can perform the strange purpose that I believe, under God, it came into being to accomplish. Do not be afraid of the Quest. It may be part of the means whereby the church in our own day will be granted a new vision, not just of Jesus, but of God.

So to our topic. As part of our overall quest to follow Jesus Christ and to shape our world according to God's will, we address a set of questions. They can be drawn together into five in particular, which we will examine in what follows:

1. Where does Jesus belong within the Jewish world of his day?

2. What, in particular, was his preaching of the kingdom all about? What was he aiming to do?

3. Why did Jesus die? In particular, what was his own intention in going to Jerusalem that last fateful time?

4. Why did the early church begin, and why did it take the shape it did? Specifically, of course, what happened at Easter?

5. How does all this relate to the Christian task and vision today? How, in other words, does this historical and also deeply theological approach put fire into our hearts and power into our hands as we go about shaping our world?

It is difficult to address all these issues simultaneously. There is a sense in which the reader will only understand the significance of all the parts when the whole is in view. If human maturity is evidenced by delayed gratification, one sign of Christian maturity may be a readiness to hear the argument through to the end, not short-circuiting it in the interests of a quick-fix spirituality or missiology. Patience is as much a virtue in history and theology as it is anywhere else.