

THE HISTORICAL JESUS: RETHINKING SOME CONCEPTS

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THE LAST two decades have witnessed a remarkable renaissance in the quest for the historical Jesus and its appropriation by theology.¹ Yet, amid the flurry of publications, some basic problems of method and terminology are often overlooked. For example, in both popular, journalistic presentations² and semipopular distillations of scholarship³ the

¹ The most recent full review of literature since 1950 can be found in W. G. Kümmel's *Dreissig Jahre Jesusforschung (1950–1980)* (Bonn: Hanstein, 1985). This great scholar of Jesus research continues his work in recent volumes of *Theologische Rundschau*; see, e.g., "Jesusforschung seit 1981. I: Forschungsgeschichte, Methodenfragen," *TR* 53 (1988) 229–49; "II: Gesamtdarstellungen," *TR* 54 (1989) 1–53. A 116-page bibliography, introduced by a 111-page sketch of the chief questers, can be found in Warren S. Kissinger, *The Lives of Jesus* (New York/London: Garland, 1985). A more general bibliography on Christology, including sections on the historical Jesus, is available in Leland Jennings White, *Jesus the Christ: A Bibliography* (Wilmington, Del.: Glazier, 1988). For general overviews of the quest, see the handy summary (from a conservative point of view) in Charles C. Anderson, *Critical Quests of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969); or still more schematically, John S. Kselman and Ronald D. Witherup, "Modern New Testament Criticism," *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1990) 1130–45. See also my own attempt at a synthesis of the results of recent research in "Jesus," *ibid.* 1316–28. Some trenchant critiques of the unexamined presuppositions of many questers can be found in Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1979) 23–110, and in James P. Mackey, *Jesus: The Man and the Myth* (New York/Ramsey: Paulist, 1979) esp. 10–51. It is perhaps symptomatic of a newer, different approach that E. P. Sanders does not begin his work *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) with a lengthy history of all research on the subject. Rather, in a "State of the Question" (23–58), he reviews and criticizes positions of major 20th-century scholars. Given all this material already in print, I think it unnecessary to drag the reader on another stroll down quest-for-Jesus lane. For those who would like to read the key works of major questers, these are available in English in the *Lives of Jesus Series*, edited by Leander E. Keck and published by Fortress Press.

² See, e.g., John Dart, *The Jesus of Heresy and History: The Discovery and Meaning of the Nag Hammadi Gnostic Library* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

³ See, e.g., Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision. Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); Henrikus Boers, *Who Was Jesus? The Historical Jesus and the Synoptic Gospels* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989).

phrase “the historical Jesus” or “the Jesus of history”⁴ is freely used, though all too frequently without detailed methodological discussion of the origin and meaning of the category. Often there will be a passing reference to the fact that the “historical Jesus” is distinguished from the Christ of the kerygma, the Christ of faith, Jesus as presented to Christian faith in the Gospels, or simply the Christian faith. Yet the source and precise significance of this distinction is rarely investigated at length, but rather presupposed.

It is the great merit of Edward Schillebeeckx that in his *Jesus* book⁵ he does hark back to and discuss the rise of concern with the historical Jesus in the 18th-century Enlightenment (the great trailblazer being Hermann Reimarus) and of the historical-critical method in the 19th-century seminar system in the German universities (the great trailblazer being Leopold von Ranke). Unlike many recent authors, Schillebeeckx does thrash out at length his distinction between the Jesus of history, the “earthly Jesus,” and the Christ of faith or the Christian kerygma.⁶ He even mentions in passing the originator of the most famous form of the distinction, Martin Kähler.⁷ Indeed, despite the surprising silence about Kähler in many recent works on the historical Jesus, it is ultimately his distinction between the historical (*historisch*) Jesus and the historic (*geschichtlich*) Christ⁸ that—sometimes in an unconscious or uncritical

⁴ I recognize that some scholars distinguish between these two terms. E.g., Joseph A. Fitzmyer (“The Lucan Picture of John the Baptist as Precursor of the Lord,” in his *Luke the Theologian: Aspects of His Teaching* [New York/Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 1989] 86–116, esp. 88) uses “the Jesus of history” to refer to the actual figure who lived in the first century A.D.; this use of “the Jesus of history” is roughly equivalent to my phrase “the real Jesus.” Fitzmyer uses “the historical Jesus” to mean the Jesus reconstructed by modern critics. I prefer to use “the Jesus of history” and “the historical Jesus” interchangeably to refer to the hypothetical figure reconstructed by modern research. Such equivalent usage seems to be the prevalent one among writers today. Moreover, in an area where so many esoteric distinctions already abound, we do not need new ones so finely drawn that it is only with difficulty that one can remember which phrase belongs with which concept.

⁵ *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Seabury, 1979; translation of *Jezus: Het verhaal van een levende* [3rd ed.; Bloemendaal: Nelissen, 1975]).

⁶ Schillebeeckx, *Jesus* 67–76.

⁷ *Ibid.* 37, 440, though Schillebeeckx does not go into the details of Kähler’s distinction. Another author who notes Kähler’s contribution is Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* 17, 48, 255, 262. Perhaps, among recent questers, only Norman Perrin sufficiently appreciated the problematic contribution that Kähler made to the quest for the historical Jesus; see his *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1967) 216–48. For a treatment of Perrin’s position, see below in Part 1.

⁸ In making this distinction Kähler, like many other German exegetes and theologians, engaged in a common academic word-game, i.e. taking two words, one from a Teutonic root and the other from a Latin root, and creating a fine philosophical distinction between

form—lies behind present-day debate about the nature of the historical Jesus and his place in contemporary theology. All the more reason, therefore, to examine in detail the distinction that the quest has inherited from Kähler and the way it has functioned in 20th-century theology. It is the thesis of this essay that Kähler's distinction, despite its great impact on subsequent scholarship, is not useful for theology today and should be replaced by other terms and distinctions. The first part of this essay will try to establish the case against Kähler's distinction, while the second half will tentatively suggest alternative terminology.

I

If I propose a rejection of the traditional, indeed revered and almost canonized distinction between the historical Jesus and the historic (or kerygmatic) Christ, I should make clear both my understanding of the terms involved and the reasons why I think they are not serviceable to contemporary theology.

As for the meaning of the distinction, the term "historical" or *historisch* refers to the dry bare bones of knowledge about the past, with the researcher prescinding from any possible relevance to or influence on our present-day life and quest for meaning. Imagine, for instance, an expert in ancient Babylonian history, driven by nothing except a thirst for exactitude, trying to draw up a precise chronology of the reigning kings of Babylon in a given century. Such a "historical" study aims at the past as dead past, viewed with the cold eye of objective research, interested in pure, verifiable data for their own sake. The "historic," in contrast, refers to the past as it is meaningful and challenging, engaging and thought-provoking for present-day men and women. Imagine, for instance, a black college student writing a thesis on Martin Luther King Jr. The young scholar might be quite careful in researching the facts; but the figure of King could never be for that student simply a datum embalmed in the past. Inevitably the student would select, arrange, and underscore certain data insofar as they seemed to speak to the problems and promises of today.

Now the claim is often made in books on the historical Jesus that, *in principle*, this distinction of historical and historic can be applied to Jesus just as much as to any other great personage of the past. *In theory* he can be made the object of a coolly distant scientific investigation, or he can be approached as the highly significant source and center of Christian thought and life down through the ages, a figure still worshiped by millions today.

them. This fact, however, does not decide the question of whether the distinction is valid or useful.

As I have indicated, although this distinction of historical (*historisch*) and historic (*geschichtlich*) is often repeated in Jesus research (especially among those strongly influenced by the Bultmannian tradition), I have come to doubt its usefulness for English-speaking scholars today, for four reasons. (1) After close to a century of use, the distinction remains ambiguous and varies in meaning or function from author to author, with even some Germans not accepting it. (2) The distinction, while supposedly employed to facilitate objective research, often carries with it the extra baggage of theological or ideological agendas. (3) The twofold distinction does not do justice to the complexity of the situation. (4) While defensible in theory, it is useless in the real world—even the “real” world of scholars. Permit me to tease out these four reasons.

First, the distinction does not always mean the same thing or function in the same way even among the various writers who use it. Martin Kähler (1835–1912) was the first German theologian to apply the distinction to Jesus in a systematic way in his famous book *Der sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtliche, biblische Christus*, first published in 1892.⁹ His intention in using the distinction seems to have been a

⁹ A good critical edition of Kähler's pivotal work (first published in 1892), with annotations giving reactions by other scholars as well as Kähler's responses and additions, can be found in his *Der sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtliche, biblische Christus* (4th ed.; ed. E. Wolf; Munich: Kaiser, 1969). A translation, with a foreword by Paul Tillich and a helpful introduction by the translator, Carl E. Braaten, can be found in *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964). For further reflections on Kähler's relation to more recent quests, see Carl E. Braaten, “Martin Kähler on the Historic Biblical Christ,” in *The Historical Jesus and the Kerygmatic Christ*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Roy A. Harrisville (New York/Nashville: Abingdon, 1964) 79–105. On p. 84 of *Der sogenannte historische Jesus* Kähler affirms the divinity of Jesus, although elsewhere he makes clear that theologians are not bound to the wording and concepts of conciliar dogmas and later systematic theology. As Otto Michel observes, Kähler thought his position on Jesus as “true God and true man” was “predogmatic”; see Michel's “Der ‘historische Jesus’ und das theologische Gewissensproblem [*sic*, probably for Gewissensproblem],” *Evangelische Theologie* 15 (1955) 349–63, esp. 352–53. For varying views on Kähler's key categories of *geschichtlich* and *übergeschichtlich*, see Heinrich Leipold, *Offenbarung und Geschichte als Problem des Verstehens: Eine Untersuchung zur Theologie Martin Käblers* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1962); Johannes Wirsching, *Gott in der Geschichte: Studien zur theologiegeschichtlichen Stellung und systematischen Grundlegung der Theologie Martin Käblers* (Munich: Kaiser, 1963). In general, Leipold is more positive on Kähler's use of the terms than is Wirsching. For a full bibliography of Kähler's works, see Martin Kähler, *Geschichte der protestantischen Dogmatik im 19. Jahrhundert* (Munich: Kaiser, 1962) 290–307. For Kähler's treatment of the historicity of Jesus within the wider framework of the various systematic presentations of the historicity and personhood of Jesus by 19th-century German theologians, see Reinhard Slenczka, *Geschichtlichkeit und Personsein Jesu Christi: Studien zur christologischen Problematik der historischen Jesusfrage* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967) 259–302. For the historical influences on Kähler's thought, see, besides the monographs of Leipold and Wirsching, Arij de Willigen, *Martin Kähler* (Assen:

defense of a particular kind of "critical pietism" in late-19th-century German Protestantism—and even he did not always observe his own distinction with strict rigor. His ultimate goal seems to have been the protection of basic traditional Christian teachings about Jesus Christ (e.g., true divinity and true sinless humanity) from the inroads of historical criticism.¹⁰ While Kähler preferred to speak of the "superhistorical" and "historical" in Jesus rather than divine and human natures, the thrust of his approach is the preservation of traditional Christology.

This was not exactly the driving concern of Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) when he took over the distinction between historical and historic into his 20th-century synthesis of Christianity and Martin Heidegger's brand of existentialism.¹¹ To be sure, Bultmann is one with Kähler in emphasizing the central Christian proclamation or kerygma of Jesus' death and resurrection. He is likewise one with Kähler in rejecting the historical Jesus as the basis or the content of Christian faith. Bultmann, however, pushes the distinction in a direction that Kähler would hardly have followed. For Bultmann, it makes no difference whether Jesus actually broke down and despaired on the cross: "The greatest embarrassment to the attempt to reconstruct a portrait of Jesus is the fact that

van Gorcum, n.d.; dissertation defended in 1945); and Christoph Seiler, *Die theologische Entwicklung Martin Käblers bis 1869* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1966).

¹⁰ It is often claimed that Kähler invented the historical/historic distinction. But, at least by way of negative reaction, he owes something to Wilhelm Herrmann's distinction between the basis of faith (everything about the earthly Jesus that is accessible to natural knowledge) and the content of faith (the exalted Christ); see Braaten, *The So-Called Historical Jesus* 14. Yet Slenczka (*Geschichtlichkeit* 281–95) rightly points out that Herrmann's distinction is not to be equated with the distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith (275). Slenczka notes (259) how surprising it is that the overviews of Jesus-of-history research by Albert Schweitzer and James M. Robinson ignore the importance of the Herrmann–Kähler debate. Beyond the influence of Herrmann, however, one must recognize that talk of *historisch* and *geschichtlich* was very much in the academic air at the time. Another significant influence on Kähler's views was probably the Erlangen school of theology (not as well known outside Germany as the Tübingen school), which stressed *Heilsgeschichte* and the nature of Christianity as a historical religion.

¹¹ See his *Theology of the New Testament* (2 vols.; London: SCM, 1952) esp. chap. 1, "The Message of Jesus" (3–32). A famous lecture on the subject became the monograph *Das Verhältnis der urchristlichen Christusbotschaft zum historischen Jesus* (3rd ed.; Heidelberg: Winter/Universitätsverlag, 1962); a brief synopsis of the monograph appeared as "Das Verhältnis des urchristlichen Christuskerygmas zum historischen Jesus," in *Der historische Jesus und der kerygmatische Christus*, ed. Helmut Ristow and Karl Matthiae (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1962) 233–35; an English translation of the lecture can be found in "The Primitive Christian Kerygma and the Historical Jesus," in *The Historical Jesus and the Kerygmatic Christ* 15–42. An earlier form (first published in 1926) of Bultmann's thought on Jesus' teaching (with heavy existentialist overtones) is *Jesus and the Word* (London/Glasgow: Fontana [Collins], 1958). In general, note that at times Bultmann will use "kerygmatic" in place of "historic," an echo of his "kerygmatic" theology.

we cannot know how Jesus understood his end, his death. . . . We cannot tell whether or how Jesus found meaning in it. We may not veil from ourselves the possibility that he suffered a collapse."¹² The mere fact *that* Jesus died on the cross is sufficient for Christian faith, i.e. for the encounter between the believer and God. While something can be known of Jesus' teaching, Bultmann maintained that "we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus, since the early Christian sources show no interest in either, are moreover fragmentary and often legendary. . . ."¹³ At this point the reader may get the uneasy feeling that the historic Christ, the kerygmatic Christ, the Christ of faith exalted by Bultmann, looks suspiciously like a timeless Gnostic myth or a Jungian archetype, no matter how much Bultmann stresses historicity and the identity of the crucified Jesus with the Christ who is preached.¹⁴ As Carl E. Braaten has pointed out, it seems highly unlikely that Kähler would have agreed with Bultmann that the NT kerygma needs only the bare fact of Jesus and his cross. For Kähler, the kerygma includes all the redemptive events attested in the Gospels: incarnation, life and teachings, cross and resurrection.¹⁵

¹² "The Primitive Christian Kerygma" 23-24.

¹³ Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* 14. In fairness to Bultmann, two points should be noted. First, in the text quoted Bultmann is reacting against the excesses of the heavily psychologizing 19th-century "liberal lives" of Jesus. Second, Robinson (*A New Quest* 19-22) detects a shift in Bultmann's position in a later article ("Allgemeine Wahrheit und christliche Verkündigung," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 54 [1957] 244-54): Bultmann sees some continuity between Jesus and the Christian kerygma on the question of law and grace (251-54). Be that as it may, the article in no way changes his basic position on the *historisch/geschichtlich* distinction.

¹⁴ Bultmann himself rejects the claim that he destroys the continuity between the historical Jesus and the kerygma. Nevertheless one is not encouraged when in a key essay he specifies that he will treat only the continuity between the historical Jesus and the primitive Christian proclamation "and not, between the historical Jesus and the Christ. The Christ of the kerygma is not a historical figure which could enjoy continuity with the historical Jesus" ("The Primitive Christian Kerygma" 18). At the same time, even Bultmann's great opponent Paul Althaus admits that Bultmann never went to the extreme of some theologians who, deeply influenced by German idealism, distinguished between the historical person of Jesus and the concept or ideal of a symbolic Christ: the former is not unconditionally tied to the latter and can ultimately be dispensed with. For Althaus' criticism of Martin Werner, Fritz Buri, and like-minded theologians, see his *The So-Called Kerygma and the Historical Jesus* (Edinburgh/London: Oliver and Boyd, 1959) 13-18.

¹⁵ As Braaten points out ("Martin Kähler on the Historic Biblical Christ" 101), Kähler would not have agreed with Bultmann that the NT kerygma needs only the bare fact of Jesus and his cross. "For Kähler the kerygma contains a larger historical section than Bultmann deems necessary. The meaning of the kerygma is nullified if the redemptive events attested—including incarnation, life and teachings, cross and resurrection—never happened. Faith cannot appropriate the meaning of events if there are no events in the

In the face of Bultmann's very different use of the historical/historic distinction, it is not surprising that some German theologians, notably Paul Althaus (1888–1966), sought in the 1950s and 1960s to reclaim Kähler's distinction for a more conservative school of thought.¹⁶ Yet, as Heraclitus observed, no one can put his foot into the same stream twice. Faced with the historical skepticism of Bultmann, and appropriating the "new quest" of Bultmann's pupils (e.g., Günther Bornkamm),¹⁷ Althaus looked to historical research for the guarantee that the Christ of faith is not just another great myth of world religions.¹⁸ So, while rejecting Bultmann's approach, Althaus took a basically positive stance to the new quest of post-Bultmannians like Bornkamm since "by its very nature, Christian faith has a burning interest in what scientific history can know about Jesus."¹⁹ One cannot imagine Kähler saying this about the German "liberal lives of Jesus" in the 19th century. Thus, although Althaus, in his opposition to Bultmann, sought to remain the faithful interpreter of

first place. . . . There is no necessity to eliminate everything but the cross of Jesus" (ibid.). As R. Hermann observes in the article on Martin Kahler in *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* 3 (3rd ed.) 1082–84, "a tendency to 'demythologize' was far from the mind of Kahler" (1082).

¹⁶ See Paul Althaus, *Der gegenwärtige Stand der Frage nach dem historischen Jesus* (Munich: Verlag der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1960) 3–19; idem, *The So-Called Kerygma and the Historical Jesus*, esp. 38–42, where he criticizes what he considers the undue narrowing of the meaning of *geschichtlich* in the Bultmannian camp.

¹⁷ There is no reason to go into the precise positions of the various post-Bultmannians like Bornkamm and Conzelmann, since that would not alter my basic point: the wide variation in meaning and use of the historical/historic distinction. For a representative sample of the post-Bultmannians, see Gunther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960); Hans Conzelmann, "The Method of the Life-of-Jesus Research," in *The Historical Jesus and the Kerygmatic Christ* 54–66; idem, *Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973); Ernst Fuchs, *Studies of the Historical Jesus* (Naperville, Ill.: Allenson, 1964); Herbert Braun, "The Significance of Qumran for the Problem of the Historical Jesus," in *The Historical Jesus and the Kerygmatic Christ* 69–78; idem, *Jesus of Nazareth: The Man and His Time* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979). Ernst Kasemann is widely acknowledged to be the "father" of the new quest among post-Bultmannians; his two most important essays on the topic are "The Problem of the Historical Jesus," in *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London: SCM, 1964) 15–47, and "Blind Alleys in the 'Jesus of History' Controversy," in *New Testament Questions of Today* (London: SCM, 1969) 23–65. See also his *Der Ruf der Freiheit* (4th ed.; Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1968). The standard survey of the "new quest" of the post-Bultmannians is James M. Robinson's *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: SCM, 1959); note especially the section on "the ambiguous term 'historical Jesus'" (26–32).

¹⁸ Note the telling use of *Gewahr* (guarantee, surety, warrant) on p. 14 of "Der gegenwärtige Stand."

¹⁹ Ibid. 19. Althaus hastens to add, in the spirit of Kahler, that such historical knowledge cannot be the basis of faith.

Kähler, the distinction between historical and historic received a new twist.²⁰

What makes the historical/historic distinction even more problematic is that some key scholars within 20th-century German Lutheranism—and German Lutheranism was the source of the distinction—reject its validity or simply ignore it. Most curious is the treatment given the distinction by Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965), the great chronicler and critic of the “liberal lives.” On the one hand, Schweitzer shows no knowledge of Kähler or his work and does not utilize Kähler’s distinction in his own presentation.²¹ On the other hand, while treating early-20th-century disputes over the historicity of Jesus, Schweitzer notes in passing the position of G. Wobbermin, a professor at Breslau, who (to quote Schweitzer) “goes off on a dangerous path.”²² Wobbermin’s dangerous path turns out to be his “attempt” to distinguish between the historical (*historisch*) and the historic (*geschichtlich*) Jesus. The distinction is understood roughly in the sense Kähler proposed, but Schweitzer seems ignorant of any previous use of the distinction and will have none of it. With sarcastic indignation Schweitzer points out that the historic Jesus has been responsible for untold evils down through the ages, from the destruction of ancient culture to the very fact of the Middle Ages to Catholicism’s attempt to destroy “the many progressive achievements of the modern state.” Who would want to give up the historical Jesus for this historic figure?²³

Closer to our own day, Joachim Jeremias (1900–1979), one of the 20th-century’s greatest experts on the historical Jesus, simply refused to operate with the historical/historic distinction. At times in his writings Jeremias will tend to equate historical (*historisch*) events with what happens in *Geschichte*. It is perhaps characteristic of Jeremias that he does not regularly employ the adjective *geschichtlich* of Jesus when he describes his own theological program; he rather speaks of the historical

²⁰ Althaus implicitly admits his shift and the reasons for it in *The So-Called Kerygma* 25.

²¹ However, the great scholar of Jesus-research John Reumann has suggested to me that Schweitzer may well have known of Kähler’s distinction but purposely suppressed Kähler’s work on the subject, so as not to disturb the pattern and development Schweitzer wanted to see in the history of Jesus-research. Reumann will be proposing his theory in a forthcoming work.

²² The translations of the quotations about Wobbermin are my own and rest upon the text of Schweitzer’s *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung* published in 1966 (Munich/Hamburg: Siebenstern Taschenbuch 77/78, 79/80 [originally published in 1906]) 520–21.

²³ In light of Schweitzer’s voluminous knowledge of the 19th-century literature on the historical Jesus, it is astounding that he should be ignorant of Kähler’s contribution (see n. 21 above). One might speculate that, if it had not been for Bultmann’s recycling of Kähler’s distinction, the latter’s work might have been lost to large sectors of the theological world outside of German Lutheranism.

Jesus and the faith-witness of the early Church. John Reumann has pointed out to me that this usage mirrors Jeremias' own theological agenda: revelation is to be found in the historical Jesus, not in the later, post-Easter response of the Christian Church.²⁴ But present-day objections to Kähler's distinction need not rest on Jeremias' theological program. For example, the great "independent" scholar Otto Michel likewise questioned the validity of Kähler's distinction on both historical and theological grounds.²⁵ Michel's reasons for rejecting Kähler's distinction include the following. (1) Kähler's rejection of the *historisch* rests on a narrow definition of that word, formed in reaction to 19th-century "lives of Jesus." (2) Kähler was seeking to provide for faith a "storm-free" area of certitude, an area that perhaps is not to be had, at least in the way Kähler conceived of it. (3) Kähler's idea of the "historic Christ" is defined too much in terms of a psychological experience an individual has of "being overpowered by Christ." (4) Kähler fails to appreciate that the "historic Christ" had a "historic" impact not only on Christians who believed in him but also on Jews who did not believe in him. Indeed, the whole dimension of the Jewishness of Jesus and his place in the history of Judaism is not given sufficient weight by Kähler. (5) Kähler's easy equation of the faith-image of Jesus proclaimed by the Church with Jesus himself lacks the 20th-century insights gained from form and redaction criticism. (6) In effect, Kähler is fleeing from the world of the historical and the historically verifiable; for him, the Word never fully becomes flesh.

Thus, at the end of even this very partial review, we are left asking ourselves: With such a variety of uses or nonuses among German scholars during the past century, is the distinction all that vital or useful for English-speaking scholars today?

A second problem with the distinction is that, almost inevitably, it leads to a "good guy/bad guy" presentation. Either the historical Jesus is exalted in order to dethrone a Christ of faith that was merely a fraudulent creation of the Church (so many from Reimarus to Paul Hollenbach²⁶), or the historic Christ is extolled over the oscillating and

²⁴ Joachim Jeremias, "Der gegenwärtige Stand der Debatte um das Problem des historischen Jesus," in *Der historische Jesus und der kerygmatische Christus* 12-25 (ET, *The Problem of the Historical Jesus* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964]). For a full presentation of what Jeremias thinks can be said about the historical Jesus, see his *New Testament Theology 1: The Proclamation of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1971). Interestingly, Küng shows a similar distaste for a firm distinction between *historisch* and *geschichtlich*; see his *Christ sei*: 148-53.

²⁵ Michel, "Der 'historische Jesus'" 349-63.

²⁶ In his article "The Historical Jesus Question in North America Today," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 19 (1989) 11-22, Hollenbach states that he pursues the Jesus of history "in order to overthrow, not simply correct 'the mistake called Christianity'" (20, borrowing a phrase from

contradictory reconstructions of the historical Jesus (so Kähler and followers, including many “dialectical” theologians like Barth and Bultmann after World War I). Granted, the distinction need not be accompanied by value judgments and theological programs, but such has been the case for about a century. All that seems to happen is that new agendas (e.g., liberation theology) replace the old ones (e.g., liberal theology of the 19th-century variety); the game of good guy/bad guy continues.

A third problem is that the dichotomy of historical/historic, while applicable to most well-known figures of the past, does not do justice to the complexity of the case of Jesus. Norman Perrin pointed out in the 1960s that a three-part distinction fits the special situation of Jesus better.²⁷ (1) One can collect descriptive historical knowledge or “hard” knowledge about a person of the ancient past called Jesus of Nazareth; this is the level of the “historical.” (2) One can then proceed to highlight and appropriate those aspects of this historical knowledge that would be significant for us today; this is the level of the “historic.” However, one could do the same thing in the case of Socrates, St. Augustine, or Sigmund Freud. Any great thinker and actor of the past can be studied on the level of cold disconnected facts and bare chronology or on the level of a meaningful synthesis of his or her thought and action, seen as relevant and challenging for people today. In that sense, one can be committed to the “program” of Socrates or Freud, one can be entranced and gripped by the person of Thomas More or Thomas Jefferson, in the same way that one can be personally fascinated by the historic Jesus, whether one is a Jew, a Buddhist, or an agnostic. (3) Hence the second level must be carefully distinguished from a third level, namely faith-knowledge of Jesus as Lord and Christ, the faith-stance that prompts me to call Jesus my Lord and my Savior. This level, in the eyes of the believer, is the unique and exclusive territory of Jesus; unlike the first and second levels, it cannot be applied to other figures of ancient history.

Strange to say, Perrin tries to maintain that his tripartite model represents the position of Bultmann. Yet Perrin himself admits that Bultmann was prepared “to describe almost all of the faith-knowledge in terms of historic knowledge.”²⁸ In my view, Bultmann’s distinction was basically the twofold one of Kähler, while Perrin’s three-part division

the liberation theologian José Porfirio Miranda). This mistake, says Hollenbach, was the divinization of Jesus as “Son of David, Christ, Son of God, Second Person in the Trinity, etc.” (19). Rejecting any “incipient christology” prior to Jesus’ crucifixion, Hollenbach logically denies that there is any continuity between the man Jesus of Nazareth and the Jesus Christ proclaimed by the Church. Hollenbach undertakes his program in order to make the historical Jesus serviceable to the liberation of oppressed peoples today.

²⁷ Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1967) 234–38.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 240 n. 1.

attempts to contribute a further conceptual clarification to the scholarly debate.

I readily admit that Perrin's three-part model does seem to fit the complex situation better than the simple dichotomy of historical/historic, but unfortunately it introduces further muddle into the already muddled terminology. As Perrin himself concedes,²⁹ Kähler uses the term "historic" for what Perrin calls faith-knowledge (Perrin's third level), while Perrin restricts "historic" to the second-level knowledge of any past figure who is relevant to our existence today. Complicating the picture even further is the fact that, actually, Kähler's discussion starts out with an existential meaning of "historic" similar to Perrin's second level, only to slide quickly into the use of "historic" for faith-knowledge of Jesus as the Lord (Perrin's third level).³⁰ The ambiguity inherent in the terminology thus stems from Kähler himself; indeed, it aroused strong objections in his own day. Willibald Beyschlag, Otto Ritschl, and Ferdinand Kattenbusch all found Kähler's concept of the historic Christ objectionable because it seemed to put Jesus on the same level as, e.g., Francis of Assisi vis-à-vis later Franciscans. Kähler replied that Jesus' unique historic impact flows from the revelation of him as the Risen One; hence the historic Jesus is not to be compared with Francis of Assisi or Ignatius of Loyola as the founding fathers of the Franciscans or the Jesuits respectively.³¹ Perhaps not all will find this explanation cogent. But more to the point, I think that Perrin's refinement of Kähler's distinction, while justified in theory, only increases the terminological confusion in practice.

Apart from these difficulties caused by the usage of Kähler and Perrin, there is a final problem in the distinction between historical and historic that makes its application to Jesus not very serviceable. The distinction presupposes that some scholars do or at least could study Jesus' life and teaching in detail without any interest whatsoever in its impact on

²⁹ Ibid. 238.

³⁰ It is remarkable how quickly Kähler leaps from the general sense of "historic," applicable to any person who has been influential in molding posterity, to the exclusivistic sense in which he applies the term to Jesus as Lord, whose influence in molding posterity consists precisely in the creation of the Easter faith in his disciples; see Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus* 63–64. In a sense Kähler is operating by way of theological analogy: from the use of "historic" for any influential figure of the past, relevant to us today, he moves to the uniquely influential figure of Jesus, relevant to Christianity as its only Lord. The linchpin of the analogy is that in Jesus' case his influence is the creation of a unique, exclusivistic faith. No doubt it is this "slide" which both opens up the possibility of a three-part distinction for Perrin and also creates difficulties for him.

³¹ See the excerpts of the arguments in the footnotes in the German edition of Kähler's essay *Der sogenannte historische Jesus* 38–39 n. a.

subsequent history or on thoughtful people today. While that may be theoretically possible in the University of Phnom Penh or for a visiting professor from Mars, is it really conceivable that a scholar in the Western world—Christian, Jew, or agnostic—could approach a detailed study of the historical Jesus without a philosophical or religious interest in, or antipathy toward, the material under the microscope? Jesus continues to be studied in all parts of the world because Marxists, Buddhists, and agnostics are all intrigued, for very different reasons, by this enigmatic Jew. As Bultmann never tired of saying, all of us come to the exegesis of Scripture with our own presuppositions, biases, and interests. This amounts to admitting that our quest for the historical Jesus contains from the beginning something of an interest in the historic Jesus as well. Perrin's first and second levels are hopelessly intertwined in the flesh-and-blood world of human scholars.

For these reasons, therefore, I think that the distinction as proposed by either Kähler or Bultmann is not useful for questers today. And yet it seems unfair to engage simply in deconstruction of the traditional terminology without proposing another model, or at least another set of distinctions, to guide would-be questers unsatisfied with the old categories. Hence, in the second part of this essay, I offer for the consideration of scholars a preliminary sketch of an alternative set of distinctions.

II

I shall first state my thesis about proper distinctions in the boldest and most paradoxical fashion possible, and then begin to unpack it with greater nuance. In brief, the historical Jesus is not the real Jesus, and the real Jesus is not the historical Jesus. I stress this paradox from the start because endless confusion in the "quest for the historical Jesus"³² arises from the failure to distinguish these two concepts clearly—to say nothing of a third, more ambiguous concept used by some authors, "the earthly Jesus."

³² More traditionally one spoke of the quest "of" the historical Jesus; a major influence here is the title of the English translation of Albert Schweitzer's classic *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung*, i.e. *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1910; reprint 1968). The original title of Schweitzer's work, first published in German in 1906, was *Von Reimarus zu Wrede* (Tübingen: Mohr); since 1913 it has borne the title *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung*. But the wording "The Quest of the Historical Jesus" can lead to a misunderstanding among the uninitiated (who is questing for whom? subjective or objective genitive?); hence the unambiguous "for." James H. Charlesworth (*Jesus within Judaism* [New York: Doubleday, 1988]) thinks the words "quest" and "search" are loaded, as though in a dark room we had lost something we might or might not find by fumbling around; he prefers the neutral term "Jesus research." I agree with his point but despair of changing the speech habits of close-to-a-century of scholars. In this essay "quest," "search," and "Jesus research" will be used interchangeably.

The Real Jesus

What do we mean when we say we want to investigate the “real” Jesus or the “real” Nero or the real anybody in ancient history? Obviously we cannot mean the *total* reality of that person, everything he or she ever thought, felt, experienced, did, and said. Even today, despite all the printed government records, TV news tapes, and biographies available, one could not know the *total* reality of, e.g., Richard Nixon or Ronald Reagan. Indeed, how could these individuals themselves—let alone anyone else—ever know their total reality, defined in such sweeping, all-encompassing terms?

Still, when it comes to modern public figures, the historian or biographer can usually assemble a “reasonably complete” picture. We will probably debate from now to doomsday the great talent and tragic flaws of Richard Nixon, but there is no debating the mountain of empirical data that public archives, military records, nightly newscasts, election tallies, presidential press conferences, Watergate tapes, Congressional hearings, and presidential libraries supply *ad nauseam*. Wading through and interpreting the facts is a monumental task, but at least the facts are there. The “total reality” of Nixon will continue to elude us, but we have and can hope to refine a “reasonably complete” portrait and record of the “real” Nixon. Passionate and biased interpretations are inevitable, but the vast fund of verifiable facts does exercise some control over wild hypotheses. In this limited, sober sense the “real” Nixon—and any recent public figure—is in principle available to the historian. The real and the historical do not coincide, but there is considerable overlap.

Not so with Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus lived for roughly 35 years in first-century Palestine. Each of those years was filled with physical and psychological changes. Even before he began his public ministry, many of his words and deeds would have been witnessed by his family and friends, his neighbors and customers. In principle these events were available at the time to the interested inquirer. Then, for the last three years or so of his life, much of what Jesus said and did occurred in public or at least before his disciples, especially those who traveled with him. Again, in principle these events were recoverable by a zealous inquirer.

And yet the vast majority of these deeds and words, the “reasonably complete” record of the “real” Jesus, is irrevocably lost to us today. This is no new insight of modern agnostic scholars. Traditionally Christianity has spoken of “the hidden years” of Jesus’ life—which amounted to all but three or four of them. The apocryphal gospels of the patristic period, mystical visions of medieval times, and modern speculation have sought to fill in the gap, but to no avail. The “real Jesus,” even in the Nixon sense of a reasonably complete record of public words and deeds, is

unknown and unknowable to the historian. The real Jesus is not available, and never will be, by historical-critical methods.³³ This is true not because Jesus did not exist—he certainly did—but rather because the sources that have survived do not and never intended to record all or even most of the words and deeds of his public ministry—to say nothing of the rest of his life.

I emphasize this point about the real Jesus not simply to revel in subtle scholastic distinctions or to set up a theological shell game I can then win on my own terms. The point I am making is true of many figures of ancient history. The life and ideas of Socrates or Pythagoras amounted to much more than we can know today. Indeed, the further back we go, usually the more meager the sources become and the less we can say. Many rulers of Babylonia and Egypt are only names to us, although in their own day they loomed like giants and their impact was immense. An expert in Greco-Roman history once remarked to me that what we know with certitude about Alexander the Great can be fitted onto a few pages of print.³⁴ This may be an exaggeration, but one is struck by what A. B. Bosworth in his recent book on Alexander the Great says about the beginning of Alexander's reign:

Unfortunately no connected account survives of them [the events surrounding Alexander's accession to the throne]. There are scraps of epitome and random flashbacks from later history, but most of the crucial details are inevitably lost. There is infinite scope for speculation and imaginative reconstruction, but the

³³ It is important to emphasize here the restriction "by historical-critical methods." All the statements made at this point in the text are made within the confines of historical criticism, which must judge real persons and events in history according to the rules of empirical evidence, open in principle to verification by any observer. Obviously this historical-critical framework prescind from, but does not necessarily deny or invalidate, what is known and held by faith. Hence the definition of the "real Jesus" presented in this section does not deny the reality of the risen Jesus known by faith; it merely brackets such questions and realities from consideration, simply for methodological reasons. For the risen Jesus as a reality known in the larger context of faith, see pp. 21 ff. below.

³⁴ Some of the ancient biographers of Alexander the Great were themselves aware of the difficulty of conflicting sources and of the selectivity of their own presentations. For a sample of the ancient lives, see Diodorus Siculus, Book 17 of his *Historical Library* (LCL 8; London: Heinemann; Cambridge: Harvard University, 1963); Quintus Curtius Rufus, *The History of Alexander* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984); Plutarch, "Alexander," *The Age of Alexander* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973) 252-334; Arrian's *The Campaign of Alexander* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971). On the problem of historiography in the case of Alexander, see N. G. L. Hammond, *Three Historians of Alexander the Great* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1983); earlier fragmentary evidence is surveyed in L. Pearson, *The Lost Histories of Alexander the Great* (New York: American Philological Association, 1960). For a recent biography, see A. B. Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire: The Reign of Alexander the Great* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1988); note the bibliography of both ancient sources and modern authors (295-314).

sources themselves allow very little to be said. We must be prepared to admit our ignorance, however galling that may be.³⁵

He could almost be writing of Jesus' public ministry. Bosworth is simply reminding us that what really occurs in history is much broader than the history recoverable by a historian.³⁶

Granted, some of the great figures of ancient history, such as Julius Caesar or Cicero, have left us a store of autobiographical writings and public records that allow some access to the "real" person. To this extent I must disagree with Marcus J. Borg's assertion that "we can in fact know as much about Jesus as we can about any figure in the ancient world," including Caesar.³⁷ When it comes to available evidence, there is a quantitative and qualitative difference in the case of some great public figures of the Roman world. To take one clear example: in Marcus Aurelius (reigned A.D. 161–80) we have the rare case of a Roman emperor who wrote down his innermost musings in a book called *The Meditations*. This, plus large amounts of correspondence, official records, ancient histories, coins, and archeology, allow the noted historian Anthony Birley to write a fairly full biography. Yet even here there are certain years in which it is unclear where Marcus was or what he was doing.³⁸

Sir Moses Finley constantly warned us about the severe limitations historians face in studying Greco-Roman history, including even the long and glorious reign of Augustus.³⁹ Indeed, Finley felt so strongly the lack of "hard" data, including reliable statistics, that he concluded that the study of ancient history is in no significant sense a science.⁴⁰ Perhaps it is wiser to distinguish between the "hard" sciences like chemistry and physics and the "soft" sciences of the humanities, especially ancient history (softer, surely, than modern history). Ancient history is much less quantifiable, much more dependent on inference based on such rough rules of thumb as the best explanations available, the more or most probable explanation, particular criteria for judging historicity, and anal-

³⁵ Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire* 25.

³⁶ On the application of this principle to the quest for the historical Jesus, see Schillebeeckx, *Jesus* 67–71.

³⁷ Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision* 15 and 21 n. 29.

³⁸ Anthony Birley, *Marcus Aurelius: A Biography* (rev. ed.; New Haven/London: Yale University, 1987). Reading through Michael Grant's *The Roman Emperors* (New York: Scribner's, 1985) reminds us how little we know about many of the men who ruled the ancient Mediterranean world in the first Christian centuries.

³⁹ Moses I. Finley, *Ancient History: Evidence and Models* (New York: Viking, 1985) 10–11.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 27, 104.

ogy.⁴¹ At any rate, Finley's basic caution is well advised. With the exception of a few great public figures, the "real" persons of ancient history—be they Hillel and Shammai or Jesus and St. Peter—are simply not accessible to us today and never will be.⁴²

I stress this point because scholars pursuing the Jesus of history often begin their treatments with the difficulties posed by the four canonical Gospels and—especially if they are spiritual descendants of Rudolf Bultmann—with the danger of trying to legitimize faith by historical research. All that may be true, but it is necessary to begin one step farther back: the difficulty of knowing anything about Jesus must be placed in the larger context of the difficulty of knowing anything about Thales, Apollonius of Tyana, or most other people in the ancient world. The problem is not unique to Jesus or the sources that narrate his story. Indeed, in comparison to many shadowy figures of ancient history, it is surprising how much we can know about Jesus.

Historical Jesus/Jesus of History

Having abandoned the naive hope of knowing the "real" Jesus by means of historical criticism, and having rejected the Kähler-Bultmann distinction between *historisch* and *geschichtlich*, what do I mean when I speak of the "historical Jesus" or the "Jesus of history"?⁴³ In brief, the Jesus of history is a modern abstraction and construct, not to be equated with the "real" Jesus, whether that reality be understood as "total" or just "reasonably complete." By the Jesus of history I mean the Jesus whom we can "recover" and examine by using the scientific tools of modern historical research.⁴⁴ Since such research arose only with the

⁴¹ On this point, with reference to Jesus-research, see the methodological discussion of Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* 23–110. For more general methodological considerations on the justification of historical judgments, see C. Behan McCullagh, *Justifying Historical Descriptions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1984).

⁴² In one sense the situations of St. Paul or Ignatius of Antioch come closer to those of Caesar or Marcus Aurelius in that Paul and Ignatius have both left us a number of letters written by themselves, containing autobiographical information. In each case we are aided further by biographical information (of varying quality) from later writers (Luke for Paul, Eusebius for Ignatius); hence the paradox that the "real" Paul or Ignatius is more accessible to the modern historian than is Jesus or Simon Peter.

⁴³ I remind the reader that I use the two terms interchangeably; see n. 4 above.

⁴⁴ This definition is not some arbitrary invention of mine; it is the commonly accepted one in present Jesus-of-history research. The same definition or its equivalent can be found in scholars who otherwise differ widely in their views, e.g. Schillebeeckx, *Jesus* 67, and Robinson, *The New Quest of the Historical Jesus* 26. While Robinson (28–29) emphasizes, quite rightly, that "objective" historical research cannot grasp the peculiarly existential, human aspect of history (e.g., the stance and outlook from which a person acts, the understanding of existence "behind" what a person does), I am rather focusing on the

Enlightenment in the 18th century (Hermann Reimarus [1694–1768] being the first famous example of a “quester”), the quest for the historical Jesus is a peculiarly modern endeavor and has its own tangled history from Reimarus to E. P. Sanders and beyond. Of its very nature this quest can reconstruct only fragments of a mosaic, the faint outline of a faded fresco that allows of many interpretations. We constantly have to remind our pupils, and sometimes even ourselves, that there are no video tapes or cassette recordings of what Jesus said or did. For better or worse, there are no Watergate tapes of Jesus’ trial before Pilate. Worse still, this marginal Jew in a marginal province at the eastern end of the Roman Empire left no writings of his own (as Cicero did), no archeological monuments or artifacts (as Augustus did), nothing that comes directly from him without mediators. A moment’s reflection on these stark facts makes clear why the paradox I offer has to be true: the historical Jesus is not the real Jesus, and vice versa. The historical Jesus may give us fragments of the real person, but nothing more.⁴⁵

Thus the two terms “real Jesus” and “historical Jesus” are relatively clear-cut, even though some theologians like Hans Küng confuse them.⁴⁶ More ambiguous—and not clearly distinct as a category—is the phrase “the earthly Jesus” or “Jesus during his life on earth.” The phrase is commonly used by exegetes, but it can mean different things to different people. For example, while the four Gospels do not, and do not claim to, portray the real Jesus with the full range of everything he ever said or did in public or before his disciples in private (as Jn 20:30 and 21:25 remind us), and while the Gospels obviously do not provide a modern hypothetical reconstruction (namely, the historical Jesus), they do present us, at least in some sense, with “the earthly Jesus,” i.e. a picture,

frequent absence of even objective data when we try to investigate figures of ancient history. This difficulty is not one of principle but of fact: data that might once have been available are not so today. Simon Peter knew a great deal more about the daily habits, sayings, and thoughts of Jesus than has been preserved in written documents. And what has not been preserved has been irretrievably lost.

⁴⁵ Hence the appropriateness of the title of John Dominic Crossan’s book, *In Fragments: The Aphorisms of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983).

⁴⁶ Of course, one must allow for the fact that Küng’s famous work *Christ sein* (*On Being a Christian*) was written for a wide audience. Nevertheless, in describing the Jesus we can know through historical-critical research, Küng interchanges “real” (*wirklich*), “true,” “original,” and “historical” (both *historisch* and *geschichtlich*) with abandon. This does not make for clear expression of thought, either in German or in English. For a striking example of this interchange of terms, see his *Christ sein* (6th ed.; Munich: Piper, 1975) 148–53 (ET, *On Being a Christian* [Garden City: N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976] 156–61). The reader should be warned that the English translation is not entirely reliable: e.g., the German phrase *Rückfrage nach Jesus*—roughly the equivalent of our “quest for the historical Jesus”—is regularly translated by the strange “counterquestion about Jesus.”

however partial and theologically colored, of Jesus during his life on earth. The ambiguity of this term "earthly Jesus" lies in the fact that it can be, and *de facto* is, also used, with different nuances, of both the real Jesus and the historical Jesus. After all, both of those phrases, in different ways, also refer to Jesus on earth. I make this point because, curiously, in his *Jesus* book Schillebeeckx uses "earthly" as a synonym for "real" after censuring its use as a synonym for "historical."⁴⁷ The ambiguity is compounded by the fact that, for some, the very phrase "earthly Jesus" might conjure up a reference to existence in heaven either before the Incarnation or after Jesus' resurrection. Indeed, to stretch a point, even the risen Jesus of the Emmaus story is, in a sense, "Jesus on earth."⁴⁸ Because of this lack of clarity in the concept, I propose that scholars not use "earthly Jesus" as a major category when studying the historical Jesus and that, if they do use it, they take pains to be clear about its precise sense in any given context.⁴⁹

One important ramification of these distinctions is that scholars should not write glibly that in a given story the Gospels depict or fail to depict "the historical Jesus." That is a hopeless anachronism. During most of their narrative (excluding Jn 1:1–13 and most resurrection appearances) the Gospels portray the "earthly" Jesus (in the sense I have just explained); they do not portray the historical Jesus. To be sure, the Gospels serve as the chief *sources* for our reconstruction of the historical Jesus; but to speak of the Gospel writers as presenting or intending to present the historical Jesus transports them in an exegetical time-machine to the Enlightenment.

Real, historical, earthly—these, then, are the distinctions I propose in an attempt to bring some terminological clarity into the murky debate about the historical Jesus—a debate made still more murky by the loose interchange of terms that mean very different things. Naturally, all that has been said up until now applies to the realm of historical-critical research, which of its very nature prescind from questions of what is known by faith. Once we enter the latter realm, terminology and relations among terms become still more complex.

⁴⁷ Schillebeeckx, *Jesus* 67–68 (cf. the Dutch original, *Jesus* [n. 5 above] 54–55). The English translation of *Jesus* is often unreliable; hence the recourse to the Dutch original here.

⁴⁸ See Lk 24:13–35; cf. Acts 1:1–5. In the Emmaus story, is the risen Jesus at the same time "earthly" insofar as he is interacting and conversing with others on earth?

⁴⁹ In the best of all possible scholarly worlds, one might banish "the earthly Jesus" from print. But since one has little hope of altering traditional scholarly locutions, the best one can do is signalize the ambiguous nature of the phrase and ask that it be explained when used.

The Historical Jesus, Faith, and Theology

From a theological point of view one must also consider the relation of the historical Jesus to the risen Jesus, the Jesus known in faith, the presently reigning Lord of the Church. Obviously, once we raise this question, we move from a purely empirical historical-critical framework, which prescind from what the believer knows or holds by faith, into a larger context in which faith, self-consciously reflecting on itself, seeks understanding. In other words, we move into an explicitly theological context. This shift makes a great difference in concepts and terminology. For instance, in the historical-critical framework the "real" has to be defined in terms of what exists within this world of time and space and can be experienced in principle by any observer. Faith and Christian theology, however, affirm ultimate realities beyond the merely empirical: e.g., the triune God and the risen Jesus.⁵⁰ Thus, to ask about the relation between the historical Jesus, reconstructed from modern historical research, and the risen Jesus is to pass from the realm of the merely empirical into the larger framework of faith and theology, as it seeks to relate itself to the historical-critical project.

Having disagreed so much with Kähler and Bultmann, I should stress where I do agree with them: the Jesus of history is not and cannot be the object of Christian faith. A moment's reflection will make clear why that must be so. More than a millennium and a half of Christians believed firmly in Jesus Christ without having any clear idea of or access to the historical Jesus as understood today, yet no one will deny the validity and strength of their faith. The same can be said, of course, of many pious Christians in First as well as Third World countries today.⁵¹ But even if, *per impossibile*, all Christians were acquainted with the concepts and research connected with the historical Jesus, the Church could still not make the historical Jesus the object of its preaching and faith. The reason is obvious: *Whose* historical Jesus would be the object of faith? Albert Schweitzer's or Eduard Schweizer's? Herbert Braun's or Joachim Jeremias'? Günther Bornkamm's or E. P. Sanders'? Jesus the violent

⁵⁰ On this point cf. G. G. O'Collins, "Is the Resurrection an 'Historical' Event?" *Heythrop Journal* 8 (1967) 381-87. O'Collins argues (rightly, in my view) that, although the "resurrection is a real, bodily event involving the person of Jesus of Nazareth" (381), the resurrection of Jesus "is not an event *in* space and time and hence should not be called historical" (384) since "we should require an historical occurrence to be something significant that is known to have happened in our space-time continuum" (384).

⁵¹ As distinct from ordinary pious Christians, some liberation theologians from the Third World have attempted critical reflection on the historical Jesus, not always with the happiest of results; see John P. Meier, "The Bible as a Source for Theology," *Catholic Theological Society of America, Proceedings of the Forty-Third Annual Convention* 43 (1988) 1-14.

revolutionary or Jesus the gay magician? Jesus the apocalyptic seer or Jesus the wisdom teacher unconcerned with eschatology? The constantly changing, often contradictory portraits of the historical Jesus served up by scholars, however useful in academia, cannot be the object of Christian faith for the universal Church.

Moreover, and more importantly, the proper object of Christian faith is not and cannot be an idea or scholarly reconstruction, however reliable. The object of Christian faith is a living person, Jesus Christ, who fully entered into a true human existence on earth in the first century A.D., but who now lives risen and glorified, forever in the Father's presence. Primarily, Christian faith affirms and adheres to this person—indeed incarnate, crucified, and risen—and only secondarily to ideas and affirmations about him. In the realm of faith and theology the “real Jesus,” the only Jesus existing and living now, is this risen Lord, to whom access is given only through faith.

What, then, is the usefulness of the historical Jesus? None, if one is asking solely about the direct object of Christian faith: Jesus Christ crucified, risen, and presently reigning in his Church. This presently reigning Lord is accessible to all believers, including all those who will never study history or theology for even a single day in their lives. Yet the quest for the historical Jesus can be very useful if one is asking about faith seeking understanding, i.e. theology, in a contemporary context. The theology of the patristic and medieval periods was blissfully ignorant of the problem of the historical Jesus, since it operated in a cultural context bereft of the historical-critical understanding that marks the modern Western mind. Theology is a cultural artifact; therefore, once a culture becomes permeated with a historical-critical approach, as has Western culture from the Enlightenment onwards, theology can operate in and speak to that culture with credibility only if it absorbs a historical approach into its methodology.

For contemporary Christology this means that faith in Christ today must be able to reflect on itself systematically in a way that will allow an appropriation of the quest for the historical Jesus into theology. The historical Jesus, while not the object or essence of faith, must be an integral part of modern theology. This appropriation of the quest by theology is not idolatry to a passing *Zeitgeist*; rather, it serves the interests of faith in at least four ways.⁵²

1) Against any attempt to reduce faith in Christ to a contentless cipher, a mythic symbol, or a timeless archetype, the quest for the historical

⁵² Cf. the remarks of Rudolf Schnackenburg, “Der geschichtliche Jesus in seiner ständigen Bedeutung für Theologie und Kirche,” in *Rückfrage nach Jesus*, ed. Karl Kertelge (Freiburg: Herder, 1974) 194–220.

Jesus reminds Christians that faith in Christ is not just a vague existential attitude or a way of being in the world. Christian faith is the affirmation of and adherence to a particular person who did and suffered particular things in a particular time and place in human history.⁵³ The quest underlines the fact that there is specific content to Christian faith, content connected with specific persons and events in past history. While the quest cannot supply the essential content of faith, it can help theology give greater concrete depth and color to that content.

2) Against any attempt by pious Christians of a mystical or docetic bent to swallow up the real humanity of Jesus into an "orthodox" emphasis on his divinity (actually, a crypto-Monophysitism), the quest affirms that the risen Jesus is the same person who lived and died as a Jew in first-century Palestine, a person as truly and fully human—with all the galling limitations that involves—as any other human being.

3) Against any attempt to "domesticate" Jesus for a comfortable, respectable, bourgeois Christianity, the quest for the historical Jesus almost from its inception has tended to emphasize the embarrassing, nonconformist aspects of Jesus, e.g. his association with the religious and social "low life" of Palestine, his prophetic critique of external religious observances that ignore or strangle the inner spirit of religion, and his opposition to certain religious authorities, especially the Jerusalem priesthood.

4) But lest the "uses of the historical Jesus" all seem to run in one direction, it should be pointed out that, despite the claims of Reimarus and many others since, the historical Jesus is not easily co-opted for programs of political revolution either. Compared with the classical prophets of Israel, the historical Jesus is remarkably silent on many of the burning social and political issues of his day. He can be turned into a this-worldly political revolutionary only by contorted exegesis and special pleading.⁵⁴ Like good sociology, the historical Jesus subverts not just some ideologies but all ideologies, including liberation theology.

Indeed, the usefulness of the historical Jesus to theology is that he

⁵³ Ernst Käsemann expresses the point this way: "Such research [into the historical Jesus] is theologically meaningful insofar as it struggles to grasp the unmistakable individuality of this earthly Jesus. The King of heaven has no countenance, unless it is that of the Nazarene" ("Die neue Jesus-Frage," in *Jésus aux origines de la christologie*, ed. J. Dupont [Leuven: Leuven University; Gembloux: Duculot, 1975] 47–57).

⁵⁴ Unfortunately this holds true of the otherwise intriguing book of Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); see, e.g., his forced interpretation (306–17) of the pericope on paying the coin of tribute to Caesar (Mk 12:13–17). More satisfying is the book he coauthored with John S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs: Popular Movements at the Time of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1985).

ultimately eludes all our neat theological programs; he brings all of them into question by refusing to fit into the boxes we create for him. Paradoxically, although the quest for the historical Jesus is often linked in the popular mind with “relevance,” his importance lies precisely in his strange, off-putting, embarrassing contours, equally offensive to right and left wings. To this extent, at least, Albert Schweitzer was correct.⁵⁵ The more we appreciate what Jesus meant in his own time and place, the more “alien” he will seem to us.

Properly understood, the historical Jesus is a bulwark against the reduction of Christian faith in general and Christology in particular to “relevant” ideology of any stripe. His refusal to be held fast by any given school of thought is what drives theologians onward into new paths; hence the historical Jesus remains a constant stimulus to theological renewal. For this reason alone the Jesus of history is worth the pains of the pursuit, including the initial pains of getting one’s categories straight—the modest goal of this essay.

⁵⁵ Schweitzer, *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung* 2:620: “Recognized by the peculiar, special character of his ideas and action, he [the historical Jesus] will always embody [literally, “retain”] for our age something strange and puzzling” (translation mine).