

## THE JESUS PRINCIPLE

### INTRODUCTION

In the sixties, James N. Robinson published The New Quest of the Historical Jesus in which he began with a statement of the possibility and necessity of such a task. Whereas his work was scholarly, logical and persuasive, it failed to excite much passion except among a few New Testament Scholars. Now, however, a set of forces have converged on the Church in her practical life and mission that makes Robinson's work prophetic. It is both possible and necessary to quest after the Man from Nazareth, though for rather different reasons than have been previously set forth. This paper consists of a brief historical sketch of the major developments in writings on Jesus, a description of factors in the present situation which occasion a renewed interest in Jesus, a statement of methodological presuppositions, and finally, a sketch of some of the results of initial probing in this arena.

### I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

#### 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

The theology of the 19th Century was dominated by the Liberal Movement. In part it was a reaction to 18th Century Orthodoxy and its emphasis on dogma, in part a response to the discovery of science and the Enlightenment's emphasis on man, in part a reflection of the new interest in history as "scientific fact, and, significantly, in part a constructive contribution to issues arising out of the Church's breakloose in world mission. One of the mayor themes of the Liberals was the life of Jesus.

#### SCHWEITZER

The effective end of that phase of liberalism was brought about by the publication in 1906 of Schweitzer's The Quest for the Historical Jesus. In that book, which was a history of the writings on the life of Jesus, Schweitzer methodically demonstrated that the Lives of Jesus that had been written disclosed far more about their author and his times than they did about Jesus. The New Testament picture of Jesus was one of a man with a worldview and task coincident with his age and intrinsically foreign to a contemporary. From that point on, the distinction between the religion of Jesus and the religion about Jesus or the Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith was firmly drawn. The former was all but inaccessible and the latter was all that mattered anyway. NeoOrthodoxy emerged stressing the Christ of Faith, and while Jesus' historical reality was firmly asserted, the content of that particular life was held to be nonessential to the faith of the contemporary believer.

#### BULTMANN

The next major phase of the discussion occurred around the work of Bultmann. In his Form Critical work he was able to distinguish various layers of historical material in the scriptures and to discern an oldest strand which appeared to be authentic. His book Jesus and the Word represents his findings in this field of investigation. A minor skirmish developed over the degree to which his historical skepticism was warranted, but the real warfare erupted over another issue, Bultmann, in his demythologizing campaign, seemed to be asserting both that the possibility of authentic faith was available to man quite apart from his hearing about Jesus, and that such faith was a possibility in fact only in confrontation with the Christian Gospel. These two assertions appeared contradictory, and critics divided over which alternative to take. This will emerge as an important point in the present situation. Meanwhile, however, Bultmann proceeded to erase the opposition

between the religion of Jesus and the religion about Jesus by showing that the two bore precisely the same existential content. It was now possible to be nonchalant and intelligently secure in the faith even while the historians and theologians were wrangling over the truth. No one was ever comfortable with the notion that faith's validity hinged on the outcome of historical criticism, but Bultmann's work removed that discomfort completely.

POSTBULTMANN

THEOLOGY

Meanwhile several other trends were in process. Buri and Ogden took Bultmann's first option and proceeded to develop theologies of faith as available simply to man as man. The happening of the Christ event was a happening in humanness itself not limited to members of a particular historic tradition. Whereas that possibility for human existence was decisively represented in the New Testament, it was certainly not limited to Christians. Existentialism and Process Philosophy provided the intellectual undergirding for their work. This is important in that it offered the way to communicate the faith that did not presuppose either a particular history or a two-story worldpicture. RSI belongs in this strain of history.

SYNOPTIC

CRITICISM

Other scholars proceeded with the New Testament criticism and, using the method of redactional criticism, reconstructed the theological positions of the writers of the Synoptic Gospels. Now it was possible to determine how different writers shaped their material and thus to locate with even more certainty the earliest strain.

THE NEW

QUEST

Then emerged the New Quest of the Historical Jesus represented by Robinson's work but by no means limited to it. There is a real possibility of obtaining historical knowledge of Jesus that would stand firm under the scrutiny of the most critical secular historian. Furthermore, such knowledge was necessary to prevent Christian faith from lapsing into abstraction and to serve as a norm for the faithful. The "what" of Jesus cannot be a matter of indifference to those addressed by his "that." Others are interested in finding a more accessible way to communicate the faith than the tortuous route of de and remythologizing the Church's creeds. This trend, as all the others, has been rooted in an evangelistic approach to the world. By and large, however, the evangelical intent has also been apologetic: how to communicate one's Christian faith to the intelligent nonbeliever or critic.

## II. PRESENT SITUATION

THE

PRESENT

Now a new set of forces has converged on the Church that moves this history a giant step forward. In the present, trends and relationships are difficult to discern: it is experienced as a swirl of events which occasion a breakthrough. This section, therefore, will be a listing of certain forces rather than an attempt to explore their interconnections and underlying unity.

COMMON

WORLDVIEW

1. The secular, scientific, urban worldview has won the globe. However it has happened, everywhere in the world people acknowledge this world to be of such nature that scientists describe. Interestingly enough, as this revolution has run its course the initial enthusiasm (or dread) with which it was greeted has been replaced by the awareness that the mysterious or awesome dimension of life has not vanished. Man's new grasp of reality has not done away with depth, nor has it made man master of all things. Indeed within the contemporary picture of the world, the unexplainable mysteries of nature and human behavior are perhaps even more vividly present than in a time when incursions of supernatural forces were regarded as commonplace. In any event, the important thing is that now the globe shares a worldpicture, and that picture is informed by science and the urban culture. And it is secular in the sense of having long forgotten any literal "twostory" image of reality.

GLOBAL	2. The geographic isolation of cultures has ended. Rapid communications and travel have brought the world's peoples into contact with each other. The moon landing and photographs of Earth have impacted the consciousness of everyone, but even more important, that consciousness has taken practical shape. The multinational
INTERDEPENDENCE	corporations have done what the UN could not do: given practical form to global interdependence. Recent oil crises and ecological concerns have further dramatized the practical importance of thinking and acting with the world as a context.
THEOLOGICAL	3. Theology has made a shift. Whereas academic theology has gone into a kind of dormance since the mid sixties, the theological reflection that has occurred at the Ecumenical Institute: Chicago has been momentous for the current time. Three themes have recurred over the past five years: The Other World, Sanctification and Profound Consciousness. Their significance rather than their content will be the topic of this paper.
DEVELOPMENTS	a. "The Other World" has been used as a metaphor to describe the states of consciousness or states of being that one experiences in the midst of his everyday pursuits. Important to note is that 'these' states simply do occur and cannot be sought or produced anywhere but in the midst of "This World." The drug cult and other consciousness expanding fads ignore the fundamental fact that "The Other World is in the midst of this World." But for our purposes, the significance of this work has been to provide a language in which to discuss the deeps of life that does not depend on a particular historical tradition or experience or education. It is the language of ontology made accessible to everyman.
THE	b. Studies in the arena of sanctification and the spirit journey have recovered the insight that "conversion" or justification is not the end but the beginning of the life of faith. This insight does not mean that justification is not a constant necessary recurrent happening. Indeed H.R. Niebuhr's notion of perpetual revolution in both personal and social arenas is everywhere affirmed. But the important thing is that approaching the question of Jesus from the perspective of justification is not the only possible approach, and indeed it may lead to the impasse of hinging faith on historical research or on a particular
OTHER WORLD	tradition.
SANCTIFICATION	c. Further work on the phenomenology of profound consciousness has explored faith, hope and love as human experience without diminishing their "given" character. Again it is possible to "see through" the Christian religious language to the human depth to which it points and to communicate this depth to and with a Bhuddist, a Muslim, a Hindu, etc.
PROFOUND	These three breakthroughs taken together have removed the basis of a Christian Bigotry that assumes authenticity resides only among members of a particular community and reduces conversion to the adoption of one historical religion. "Conversion means changed lives, lives changed profoundly and practically, and that can not be restricted to those who recite the Boy Scout Oath like I."
CONSCIOUSNESS	4. Finally, the mission of the Church has turned to the global practicality of human development. The Church has turned to the world. At the recent World Council meeting in Nairobi, matters of consuming interest included minority rights, third world development, and the struggle for liberation against unjust social structures. The intent of the Church is to be of service to the world, and it acknowledges itself in this regard to be in common with peoples of many religions, ideologies and cultures. This commonness has been dramatically experienced in Social Demonstration projects around the world. In 5day on location consultations, people
IMPLICATIONS	
PRACTICAL	
MISSION	

of many fields of expertise meet together with local villagers in an underdeveloped area and corporately build a plan for rapid development. Many cultures, geographic areas and faiths are represented, and in the midst of intensive work in the social arena, lives are profoundly changed, differences lose their divisiveness and a consciousness of the depths of life emerges. The difficulty comes at the point of giving dramatic or liturgical expression to the reality that is present. At this point in time the available vehicles for expression come from divided religious traditions. There may be no way around this impasse, but one theological task of the present is to enable the traditions to express the reality that is present rather than to hinder its expression. A further task is to clarify the dynamics of lives being profoundly changed quite apart from religious expression. These are constructive tasks, not apologetic ones. The question is to bring clarity to an observable phenomenon, not to explain a tenant of one's beliefs to a skeptical audience.

In the midst of these forces, a reexamination and reappropriation of the life of Jesus is very much in order. For Jesus occasioned profoundly changed lives. While operating within one particular historical religion, he saw through its trappings to the profound depths they encased. And he was so able to communicate this reality that his followers invented a new mythological vehicle designed to function in the common worldview of the times and therefore to include people of many traditions. But the Church's paradigm for human fulfillment was Jesus. When people sought ways to relate to their experience of life's fearfulness and fascination, the Church pointed to Jesus as one "like us in every respect, only without sin."

Who, then, was this Jesus? What was the reality he stood before? What was his spirit journey? How did he catalyze changed lives? How did he sustain his drive? What was the quality of his doing? What were discernible components of his presence? What are the implications of these answers for our time?

THE  
JESUS  
FIGURE  
THE  
QUESTIONS

### III. METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The basic approach to this work depends on an identification with Jesus in reading the Scriptures. Most often the disciples or others in the audience are objects of readers' identification simply because their actions and responses are more easily recognizable. That procedure, however, is likely to lead to the conclusion that Jesus as a man, a doer, and a teacher is essentially foreign to human nature: either we are so "sinful" or he was so "holy" that he is understood as a figure foreign to ordinary human experience. The Church, however, has always declared the opposite: he IS human nature in its fullness and authenticity. The starting point for this study thus presents Jesus as myself: what is depicted in Scripture is just that which I have done, been and said. Jesus is neither a moral pattern nor an abstract ideal: he is I in my depth humanness. Adopting this approach requires effort, and a practical exercise in incorporating it would be to paraphrase John 14:17 with oneself as the speaker.

The second methodological presupposition, closely related to the first, is that the picture of Jesus be regarded as indicative, not imperative and not ideal. This means that The Man in the New Testament is a portrayal of my experience in its depth and fullness. This is the point of identification that makes a contemporary reading of the New Testament both possible and profitable. It does not require familiarity with ancient languages or cultures, nor does it demand a particular philosophical training. One's own life is the keystone for grasping the picture of Jesus and its significance for the present.

IDENTIFICATION  
WITH  
JESUS  
INDICATIVE  
NOT  
IMPERATIVE  
AUTHENTICITY

In the third place, the quest for Jesus comes from the question of the shape of

NOT  
CONVERSION

authentic life more than the question of how one comes to faith (authenticity). The latter question has been the preoccupation of Protestant theology since the Reformation despite Luther's injunction that we are to be "little Christs." This preoccupation has led to the placing of Jesus at the center of faith and the consequent exclusion from the fellowship of the faithful of those of other heritages. But when asking about the dimensions of human authenticity, the other question with its attendant biases vanishes.

REALITY  
NOT  
WISHDREAMS

Finally, one approaches the New Testament assuming the full humanity of Jesus. That is, elements of humiliation, resentment, weakness, rootlessness, weariness, ineffectivity and frustration are all recognized as components of the experience of a Jesus who fully participated in humanity. The New Testament rarely dwells on these matters, but neither does it consign them to inauthenticity. Acknowledging this fact enables one to grasp the New Testament as presenting a live option for relating to these commonplace experiences, not the pseudoalternative of avoiding them.

PROCEDURAL  
STEPS

Moving through the layers of tradition in the New Testament to reach The Man is a complicated process. Each stage rests on the phenomenological method suggested above. First it is necessary to discern the empirical reality the Church experienced as it encountered the gospels. Material for this task is the latest strain in the gospels and usually reflects creedal motifs editorially added to the tradition. Secondly, it is necessary to seek the empirical reality the writers experienced as they confronted The Man. This stage is complicated because of the multitude of sources used by the different writers in compiling their accounts and even the uncertainty as to which of the gospel writers preceded which. Yet the bearers of the early tradition encountered some reality which impelled them to action. Finally, using the best available critical wisdom on the earliest material, it is necessary to inquire about the reality experienced by The Man as he moved through life.

ANTICIPATED  
RESULTS

It should be noted that the final product of this "quest" is less a matter of historical "fact" than of contemporary illumination. In this it is no different from earlier attempts to write a life of Jesus. And like the others, the motivation of the quest will shape its results. But any attempt to achieve a purely objective, non historical stance is neither possible nor particularly interesting. The present situation, however, needs the illumination such a study can provide. Only the results will determine how successful was the quest. What follows are some suggestive, preliminary findings that illustrate the first step of the procedures outlined above.

#### IV. PRELIMINARY DIRECTIONS

KNOWING

"He spoke with authority." Jesus' words received agreement because they dealt with the profound consciousness of everyman, not with debatable intellectual issues. Such speech derives from perception of reality in its depth and discernment of its practical consequences. Against such speech there is no rebuttal, and he is often presented as silencing opponents who raise criticisms from the point of authoritarian traditions.

DOING

His deeds were "miracles." They brought a dimension of wonder into ordinary situations that occasioned an unexpected alteration of the situation and resulted in profoundly changed lives. The magical elements recorded in Scripture need not hinder the contemporary reader from discerning components of Jesus doing that are applicable today. His deeds were the opposite of the slow, pedantic, bureaucratic procedures to which we are accustomed. The Man appeared and things happened. They happened with lasting effectiveness because both the profound and the

practical dimensions were touched.

## BEING

His presence was awesome. Somehow he so communicated the presence of the ultimate mystery of life that merely touching the hem of his garment occasioned transformation. Communicating or bearing the awe is a human experience, and social roles have been assigned to carry out this function (shaman, priest, saint, magician, etc.). Usually, however, the possibility of everyman being transparent to the profound mystery of life has been minimized. But just this is the consequence of taking seriously the life of Jesus as a human model. Probably the communication of awe today is a corporate, not an individual, function, although there will always be charismatic personalities among us. But the team, the disciplined task force, the religious order these seem today best to embody a style transparent to Being itself.

Jesus was a man of profound faith. Not only was he conscious of the raw, capricious mysteriousness of life, but he also trusted that one. Not only was a "notmeness" in charge that very "not-meness" is "Father." Thus is disclosed the depth of profound consciousness: utter confidence in the terrifying reality discerned to be at the heart of life. Precisely that faith, as a happening that one can neither earn nor achieve but only acknowledge, is the content of salvation, and it depends on no creedal affirmations whatever. At best they are its poetic expression; at worst, its impediment. Usually that faith is catalyzed in an encounter with one who embodies it as he demonstrates its practical transformation of the given situation. This may take many practical forms: discerning realistic possibility when alloptions appear closed; injecting ultimate significance into an apparently trivial situation; or relegating to irrelevancy paralyzingselldoubt by laying on an overwhelming demand. All of these are simply outward manifestations of a basic confidence in the final mystery of life.

## FAITH

Jesus was a man of profound love. His sphere of active concern moved far beyond family, friends and followers. He also cared for "the least of these." This, too, is at the heart of humanness. Man cares. He often goes to great lengths to hide from the extent of his concern, but often as not this is due to a lack of a concrete way to act out his passion effectively. Once the way is provided, however, he will give up all his possessions, move into the most undesirable circumstances, face the most scathing criticisms, risk the most overwhelming odds and finally give up his life itself on behalf of service to mankind. And in the midst of his practical struggles for effective action, he manifests a peace that, to all outward appearances, "passeth all under-standing." But that peace comes only in active, effective care for all that is.

## LOVE

Jesus was a man of profound hope. His was the hope that "appeareth" when faith and love are intensified. It was not hope for the world ("In this world you will have trouble, but fear not I have overcome the world."), but hope in Being. This hope "appeareth" at just the point where all hopes are dashed, when there is nothing left to hope for. It was the hope against and beyond hope as if Being itself were hoping through him. And whereas this hope had "neither logical basis nor social function, it nonetheless left its residues in the movement in history that is the Christian religion. Occasions of hope's appearance are occasions of radical social rebirth, but it is not the hope that "causes" the change. The hope is rather the wellspring of unfettered creativity from which the new in personal and social life emerges.

## HOPE