

# Honest to Jesus

*Giving the historical Jesus a say in our future.*

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## INTRODUCTION

### Historical Jesus Studies as a “School of Honesty”

In 1906 Albert Schweitzer commented:

The critical study of the life of Jesus has been for theology a school of honesty.

*(The Quest for the Historical Jesus)*

That is a most revealing observation, and it comes from someone who had just reviewed the efforts by historical Jesus scholars over more than 100 years. It reminds us that coming face to face—or even reasonably close—to the historical Jesus will not be a comfortable experience. The Jesus who trod the pathways of ancient Galilee is a stranger to our times and to our churches, and we may not find it easy to take on board what he has to say to us.

So: Jesus scholars, beware! Anyone here with two good ears had better listen!

In his recent book, *The God of Jesus. The historical Jesus and the search for meaning*, Stephen J. Patterson begins with an observation about the struggle that is occurring within New Testament scholarship in North America. He describes it as involving “a fundamental realignment” in the way we understand Jesus, Christian origins and the New Testament itself. He says:

This struggle, which has been developing behind the scenes and in polite conversation, has now been forced into the open as groups like the Jesus Seminar and individuals like [Burton] Mack have produced materials for public consumption, exposing a wide audience to some of the most challenging critical work being done in New Testament scholarship today. (p. xii)

A point of disclosure! Patterson is a member of the Jesus Seminar. Further, Burton Mack himself was also a Fellow of the Jesus Seminar for many years, although he is no longer involved in that project.

You can determine whether Patterson is a credible witness. Assuming that he is, Patterson is highlighting how significant turmoil in scholarly work is starting to impact on the wider public as materials now being produced bridge the traditional gap between the scholar and the lay person.

But Patterson goes further. He writes:

Critical scholarship—not only historical critical scholarship, but also newer approaches to the Bible using critical theory—has pressed our understanding of the texts and traditions of ancient Christianity to the point where **organized Christianity, if it were to be guided by such work, would have to begin to rethink some of its basic theological commitments.** (p. xii)

That, of course, explains the enthusiastic welcome given to such studies by some people. It also goes a long way towards explaining the visceral hostility encountered. It seems that not everyone drawing personal meaning—and/or professional status—from the churches as presently structured wants to see a radical reformation!

But Patterson appears to embrace the prospect of such a radical “rethink.” He goes on to add:

**The church must take seriously what scholars today are saying about the Jesus tradition. But for this to happen, scholars must also be willing to say what they think their work means, ...** Scholars should not shrink from asking (these questions). The church should not fear their answers. (p. xiii)

So we have set the scene for asking whether the historical Jesus has something to contribute to our consideration of whether progressive churches will live or die:

- What are the Jesus scholars telling us?
- And what might these new insights mean for the churches?

I will build what I have to say around those two questions.

## WHAT THE JESUS SCHOLARS ARE TELLING US

What are these new questions emerging in historical Jesus studies? One prior item concerns a re-appraisal of the relevance of historical Jesus to us now.

### The Renewed Quest for the Historical Jesus

One way of approaching this question is to consider the alternatives. What would we have if we did not make the effort to recover the historical Jesus? Or, if the historical Jesus proved impossible to retrieve—as many NT scholars argued between 1920 and 1970—how would that affect us?

Our options would be fairly grim, I suggest—

1. The **canonical Jesus** could be taken, or rejected, at face value. That would probably require us to blend the four distinctive portraits of Jesus into some form that suited our needs. We would lose the particular emphasis of each Gospel in doing that. And we would end up with a supernatural figure who acted within a world that we know has never actually existed. We might even recognize that this was the stuff of legend, rather than history. In which case we would say, as Bultmann did, that it does not matter “what” (*was*) Jesus did, it is enough to know “that” (*das*) there was once such a person.
2. We could supplement the historical caricature of a harmonized canonical Jesus with the more satisfying **Christ of faith**. The doctrines and rituals of the church would certainly help us know what to think and believe about Jesus—both before and after Easter. And that might be sufficient for us to find meaning and purpose in life. But we would never have any prospect of validating those ecclesial portraits by comparing them with independent information about the historical Jesus. We would have to take the Church’s version of Jesus “on faith.” And much as I love the church, that is not a practice to be recommended.
3. We could also **spiritualize Jesus** entirely. We could sever any connection with the historical figure, and engage only with the spiritual figure encountered in meditation and devotion. The **Christ archetype** is a psychological reality, and can be used to great effect in both therapeutic settings and spiritual direction. But we will then have moved a long way from the historical figure of ancient Palestine.

Let me draw your attention to the sub title of Stephen Patterson's book. His study is called: *The God of Jesus*. And the sub title is: *The historical Jesus and the quest for meaning*. He argues the case that the search for the historical Jesus is **always also a search for God**, or a search for meaning. And he gives a particular slant to that observation when he writes:

... if one proclaims that God raised *Jesus* from the dead, that *Jesus* is the Son of God, then it makes a difference what he said and did, what people experienced of him that moved them to say such things. (p. 52)

### **New opportunities for historical Jesus studies**

The renewed interest in the theological significance of the historical Jesus has coincided with some new opportunities to make progress in this field. We have new materials available, as well as some new approaches to old questions.

#### *Gospel of Thomas*

The recovery of the Gospel of Thomas has been a major breakthrough in historical Jesus studies. A copy of this long lost gospel was discovered as part of a large collection of ancient religious texts unearthed near the Egyptian city of Nag Hammadi in 1945. This was a Coptic translation of Thomas, but it allowed scholars to identify several Greek papyri found some 45 years earlier as also being fragments of three different copies of Thomas. Suddenly we had excerpts from four separate copies of Thomas!

The authorship of this ancient text is unknown, but it seems to have originated in Syrian Christian circles. While the version of Thomas recovered in Egypt is best **dated** to some time in the second century, there are good reasons for thinking that Thomas was composed before the canonical Gospels gained their ascendancy within the churches. Further, some of the sayings in Thomas appear to be very early and may even reflect a stage of the Jesus tradition older than that found in Mark.

In fact, the **form** of Thomas is at least as significant as its content. The Gospel of Thomas is a collection of sayings with virtually no narrative elements. This takes us back to the earliest form of the Jesus traditions, before the development of the narrative gospel by Mark. What we find in the earliest layers of the Jesus tradition appears to be a focus on the words of Jesus, not the deeds.

#### *Sayings Gospel Q*

The discovery of Thomas was paralleled by a new confidence that an early sayings source could be identified behind the synoptic Gospels. This 'Q' source had been proposed long before, but many scholars were sceptical of the very idea of a gospel that lacked a passion narrative. Thomas put those doubts to rest, and Q scholarship has developed impressively in the past couple of decades.

As the Q texts have been studied closely, scholars have been able to propose at least two and possibly three layers within even that early form of the Jesus tradition. That in turn has allowed a glimpse into the earliest phases of the Jesus movement, including its transition from

a community gathered around the wisdom of Jesus to a sect that looked for his return as an apocalyptic messiah.

What we see is a movement that treasured the wisdom of Jesus, more than stories about his actions; even his death and resurrection. Again: word, not deeds!

### *Common Sayings Tradition*

John Dominic Crossan is just one of many current Jesus scholars who have exploited the new data made available by these finds. In particular, the overlap of Thomas and Q—some 40 parallels—has allowed scholars to identify a **common sayings tradition** (CST) that predates any of the extant texts. This core of traditional Jesus materials holds the promise of new insights into the person and message of Jesus. Once more, the focus is on words, not deeds.

### **Begin with the Sayings**

At the same time as archaeological and literary efforts offered new texts for consideration, scholars were also developing new ways to ask questions of the texts. It is fitting that these new questions tended to focus on the sayings of Jesus, rather than his deeds.

We now focus briefly on one of the most distinctive things about the work of the Jesus Seminar. Generally speaking, neither the methods nor the historical conclusions of the Seminar are especially remarkable in modern NT studies. In any case, we expect many—if not all—of our findings to be revised or overturned as time passes and new insights are brought to bear on the data.

But the Jesus Seminar made a significant choice early in its life, when it agreed to focus on the sayings of Jesus before considering the stories about his deeds.

Several factors influenced that choice:

- The more than **1,500 sayings** out numbered the reports of Jesus' deeds (< 400) by a wide margin. There was clearly more work to be done with the sayings materials.
- Recent **NT scholarship** had also stressed the sayings over the actions. Bultmann, Bornkamm and Perrin—to name just three major scholars in the field—had all given priority to the sayings of Jesus.
- Many of the original members of the Jesus Seminar had been part of the **Parables Seminar** within the SBL in the decade or so beforehand.

For the scholars involved in such inquiries, a key concern was to test the coherence of Jesus' words with the message of the church. That involved a focus on comparing messages, not actions.

That bias towards the sayings found among scholars, is reflected as well in **popular interest**. As Harper SanFrancisco learned (perhaps to their surprise and dismay), sales of *The Acts of Jesus* have not been anywhere near the levels reached by *The Five Gospels*. You guessed it: *The Five Gospels* deals with the Jesus Seminar's work on the sayings of Jesus, while *The Acts of Jesus* is concerned with his deeds.

This informal and spontaneous indicator of interest suggests that people like us are more interested in the sayings of Jesus than in the things he is said to have done. We have probably long since given up any attachment to his miracles, discounted the virgin birth and begun to question to literal meaning of the resurrection. And the ascension ...

But we still want to think that there is wisdom in the words of Jesus. We may consign the rest of the tradition to bath water, but we think that there is still a baby in there somewhere: most likely in the authentic sayings of Jesus.

In any event, we are not as likely to have any need to imitate his actions. But we are wondering whether he still has something to say that we really do need to hear!

The nature of the sayings, and their origins in an **oral culture**, put them in a different category from the stories about Jesus' actions. As sayings, they will have been said more than once even by Jesus himself, and then performed by countless other speakers within the Jesus movement. Like a good joke in our modern world, we can still recognize the original **voiceprint** of the creative storyteller even after multiple performances by different people over an extended period of time.

The actions of Jesus are another matter. Particular **events happen just once**. The reports of them are always second hand. They are especially susceptible to legendary development, and they seem to be used in the tradition for theological purposes rather than as simple accounts of specific events. As Lane McGaughey notes:

The best one can hope to recover with respect to deeds are the earliest reports of bystanders about what they thought they saw, whereas the authentic sayings indicate what Jesus himself thought or intended ... ("Why Start with the Sayings," p. 20)

He cites with approval the couplet coined by Julian Hills: "sayings are repeated, deeds are reported."

In addition, I think there is another point worth noting about the value of the sayings over against the deeds of Jesus. The sayings are **especially relevant to our situation** as we seek to reinvent Christianity so that it engages creatively and prophetically with an emerging global culture.

The deeds of Jesus—whatever they were—are events of ancient history. They were the ways that Jesus deemed it appropriate to act on his vision of God's imperial rule in the particular historical circumstances where he found himself. We will, of course, have some interest in how Jesus acted and in what others did to him. If nothing else, we will want to know—if at all possible—whether or not his actions were coherent with his words. Did he act with integrity? Did he practice what he preached? Did he walk the talk?

But we live in another time and place, far removed—in all kinds of ways—from the circumstances and the experiences of Jesus. His particular actions may not speak directly to our situation. But the creative wit and wisdom of Jesus may offer us something more. Not a complete recipe for us to follow, but at least some of the key ingredients!

In pursuing the questions before us, I am not suggesting that our task as Christians is simply to imitate Jesus. We do not have the final and complete picture of the historical Jesus. And even if we did, that would not give Jesus the all-important say in what we must do now in our situation.

Our situation is complex and nuanced. It requires more than a simple revival of a golden past. We need to live into the future, informed by the past but not controlled by it.

### Thumbnail Sketch of the Historical Jesus

Before considering the significance of these new sources and methods for the future of Christian communities, allow me to provide a thumbnail sketch of Jesus as he typically appears in the reconstructions offered by the Jesus Seminar. Not because the Jesus Seminar is in total agreement or entirely correct about Jesus, but because there is something in this glimpse of Jesus that is compelling.

What we are dealing with here is best summarised as the “Jesus of the parables and aphorisms:”

- Jesus appears to have been an **itinerant sage**—a wandering wise man—who delivered his parables and aphorisms in public and private venues for both friends and opponents in return for food and drink.
- He **never claimed** to be—nor allowed others to call him—the **Messiah or a divine being**.
- Jesus taught a **wisdom that emphasised a simple trust** in God’s unstinting goodness and the generosity of others. Life was to be lived and celebrated without boundaries and without thought for the future. He rejected asceticism.
- For Jesus, **ritual ceremonies had no value**. Purity taboos and social barriers were never allowed to come between the people who responded to God and one another in simple trust.
- There were **no religious “brokers”** in Jesus’ vision of God’s domain. No priests, no prophets, no messiahs. Not even Jesus himself was to be inserted between a person and God.
- To experience **forgiveness** one simply had to offer forgiveness to others.
- **No theological beliefs served as a test** for participation in God’s domain.
- **Apocalyptic speculation** with future punishments for the wicked and rewards for the virtuous **played no part** in Jesus’ teaching.
- Jesus was killed because he **refused to compromise** this radical vision of life. He may even have taken direct action in the Jerusalem Temple to express his view of God’s imperial rule. Those defending the status quo with its elaborate brokerage system for religious favors had to destroy him or lose their hold over others.

If that glimpse of Jesus is valid to any extent, it poses a significant challenge for the Christian churches. After all, we claim his name and to be his exclusive representatives in our society. Yet, on virtually every point in that sketch, the churches’ views are in contrast to those which now seem to have been typical of Jesus!

- **The ordained sons of Adam**, have numerous places to lay their heads, offer little by way of original wisdom, and have become settled householders rather than itinerant sages.
- The churches insist that Jesus was **both divine and the Jewish Messiah**

- We have often **embraced asceticism**, and we have certainly encouraged a negative attitude towards bodily life in this natural world. If it feels good it must be bad for (the real eternal spiritual) you.
- Rather than teach a wisdom that supports simple trust, the churches have often cultivated a fear that feeds on **guilt and anxiety**.
- Church experience is full of **boundaries**. Living dangerously in the freedom of God's sons and daughters is rarely encouraged.
- **Ritual and sacrament** have immense value, as seen by the steps to protect the privileges of those authorized to celebrate them.
- **Purity taboos and social barriers** have too often crept back in; and especially those based around gender and sexuality.
- **Religious brokers** have established and sustained immense power within the church.
- **Many a saint and a cleric** have been inserted between Jesus and us, let alone us and God.
- **Forgiveness** was meted out by the clerical brokers, and even sold for financial and other gain.
- **Theological beliefs** have certainly served as **tests for participation**; indeed even for physical survival as heretics and schismatics have been hounded and slain.
- **Apocalyptic expectation** has been used to sustain a hold over people, and to validate accommodation with the present empires of human society.
- Dying for the **integrity of one's radical vision** is hardly typical of church life.

It is not hard to sense that **the institutional church** would most often vote with the Sanhedrin. The churches have had many hundreds of years experience in handing Jesus over to the Governor. I believe that we gladly accept Barabbas in place of the disturbing Jesus of Galilee. Were Jesus to arrive at many of our congregations today he may find us no more inclined to embrace his vision of God's domain in everyday life than his peers in ancient Galilee.

## WHAT THE NEW INSIGHTS INTO JESUS MEAN FOR THE CHURCHES

We now take up the second part of Steve Patterson's challenge:

The church must take seriously what scholars today are saying about the Jesus tradition. But for this to happen, **scholars must also be willing to say what they think their work means**

### Reinventing Church as the Community of Jesus

Whatever our approach to Scripture and to faith, people of faith will always need to articulate our understanding of Jesus. For some of those people, and I am one of them, that will no longer be in the concepts and language of the ancient world.

For people such as myself, the processes and the findings of recent Jesus studies are part of a movement of God's Spirit in the contemporary world. They free us from nonsensical affirmations that none of us take seriously, but few of us dare question.

Of course, we believers in exile find ourselves not just in an alien space far from the multi-layered worlds of antiquity—but also in a church that often seems far removed from the first disciples of Jesus. We are part of a church much compromised by our alliances with the rich and powerful over the centuries. It has been a rare and a brave Christian soul who has stood with the poor against the rich and powerful, and for truth against the magisterium of the Church.

If there is even a pinch of truth in the glimpses of Jesus that emerge from the research of the Jesus Seminar, then the historical churches of Christianity have much to answer for. There is, after all, an Evangelical impulse at the center of Seminar's portrait of Jesus that our critics find so offensive.

### A Church in Crisis

There is no need for me to rehearse in this forum the challenges facing the churches at this point in our history. It may suffice to note that Loren Mead of the Alban Institute considers that we are going through the most significant changes since the period of Constantine. That's a once in 1,500 years type of transition. No wonder it hurts!

The rulers of our world no longer want or need the churches as they once did, but we act as if the old order remains intact:

most of the generation that now leads our churches grew up with [this old paradigm] as a way of thinking about church and society. And all the structures and institutions that make up the churches and the infrastructure of religious life, from missionary societies to seminaries, from congregational life to denominational books of order and canons, are built on the presuppositions of the Christendom Paradigm—not the ancient, classical version of the paradigm as it was understood centuries ago, but the version that flourished with new life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This paradigm in its later years flourished and shaped us with new vigor, just as a dying pine is supposed to produce seed more vigorously as it senses the approach of its own death.  
(p. 18)

As Mead sees it, the old paradigm has collapsed. We are in the “time between the paradigms” and we find ourselves: **pulled by the new and constrained by the old.** (p. 22) I find that a poignant description of my experiences as a Christian and as a parish priest. *Pulled by the new and constrained by the old*

Typical reactions include:

- is there a future?
- is there time to find a future?
- will a new paradigm emerge?

### **Taking the historical Jesus to Church**

I want to consider now what might happen if the historical Jesus is brought into the picture. What if we set Jesus free from our Sunday School portraits and let him loose in our communities? Can we take the Jesus of the Red & Pink material into our churches?

Would he be welcome there? Would he fit in? Would it be an explosive combination? Would it renew and invigorate the churches?

I am also mindful of the Jesus sayings about new wine in old wineskins (or, new patches on old cloth)!

The Jesus Seminar suggests **only 18%** of the sayings attributed to Jesus are **authentic**. Might it be that a similar proportion of the church’s historical baggage must be jettisoned? Is there a sufficient core of tradition and practice left? Could Christians handle a less supernatural Jesus and a lesser role for dogma and ritual?

I think we must embrace such a reduction in our metaphors for the sake of credibility

So what are the implications of Jesus studies for the churches today? In very broad terms, they might be described as follows:

1. They include the assertion that the **historical Jesus deserves to have a powerful say** in the way people imagine their religion and express that faith in word and symbol.
2. They include the idea that people have **a right to know** that there is a difference between the Jesus of history and the various frames of faith in which he has so often been presented by the churches.
3. They include the insight that we can learn more about being people of faith in our own day by **listening to both the original voice of Jesus and also** to the voices of his **first followers**. [There is much wisdom in the Gray and Black materials! But we are best to not confuse this traditional material with the distinctive voice of Jesus.]
4. And I believe that they also include the realisation that the actual historical humanity of Jesus is the focus of his divine significance to us. It is **in Jesus-as-human** that Christians see God at work within and amongst us. Not as the Holy Stranger, but as the Familiar Sacred. The one who called us into being, who would call us out of our exile, and into that reality beyond personal death that we presently label “resurrection.”

I believe that the findings of recent Jesus studies do have implications for church life. Critics and friends alike are correct in sensing that, but they are not just for church life. The implications run wider to include also the place of our Christian tradition within a wider (emerging, global) community. The implications touch the daily lives of both individuals and communities. They will affect anyone who want to form and sustain lives that integrate faith and everyday life.

So what are the implications of the Jesus Seminar for the churches today? How do we take this kind of Jesus into our churches? Dare we do so? That is our focus in the time ahead of us, as we consider the topics of Scripture, community, worship and discipleship.

### **Scripture as Text of Liberation**

#### *The Problem*

I am aware that I am starting with the Bible. I am doing that because the problem of the Bible lies at heart of our dilemma as progressive churches.

In the popular mind, the Bible has become in many ways a substitute icon for God. Here is a tangible symbol for the transcendent reality. The battle over the Bible is a struggle for a lexicon to speak of the sacred.

It is not entirely inappropriate that this is so. The Bible lends itself to serve as a proxy for God/Religion in this struggle. It is the product of human creativity and effort (as is Religion and idea of God). If we can turn around people's attitudes to the Bible, perhaps we change their ideas about faith.

The core problem in the area of Scripture is our *failure to integrate critical Scripture scholarship* into the life of the churches. We have left our people functionally illiterate in using the Bible. This not a new problem. It emerged slowly over several hundred years, but it has now become critical.

The responsibility for this lies with both the churches and the scholars. The churches did not want to know—and the scholars were happy not to say! But that conspiracy of silence will no longer serve us well; if it ever did.

#### *Jesus and the biblical tradition*

Jesus was not a biblical fundamentalist. Nor was he a liberal Scripture scholar! He belongs outside both those categories and the arguments that lie behind them. And that is a significant insight in itself. Our anxieties over the place and meaning of the Bible were unknown to Jesus, and played no part in his thought.

Jesus did not stand within the scribal traditions of his time. He is remembered as someone unlike the scholars. And yet he clearly valued the biblical traditions and was profoundly shaped by them. At the same time, Jesus seems to have enjoyed an authority sourced from something other than Scripture.

It seems reasonable to conclude Jesus would have developed the idea of Scripture differently had his experience been more like ours. I suspect that he would have integrated scholarship better than we have done up until now. In any case, we can see that his metaphors for God's

active presence enlarged upon and enriched the biblical tradition, rather than being simply derivative.

### *Opportunity*

We may have some unique opportunities to liberate the Bible within the churches, and to release Scripture to act as a text of liberation within our communities and in our personal experience.

We can access biblical scholarship that is largely free of confessional constraints. Our general education levels are rising. The development of information technology offers opportunities to imagine and to experience the Scriptures in entirely new ways. If the printing press was a key technology for the Reformation, I wonder what the Internet will contribute to our journey of faith?

### *Agenda*

If we have an historic opportunity, what might form the agenda of this project?

First, we must **integrate scholarship** into the fabric of church life. We need translations of sacred texts that are ecumenical, interfaith and truly inclusive. We need networks and programs to offer well informed education resources to raise functional literacy levels in religion. We need curriculum materials for children and adults. And we need to move beyond paper and into cyberspace.

We must also **de-stabilize the canon**. That sounds like a radical proposition. But why should decisions made under the constraints of long-vanished philosophical and political realities continue to shape the way we hear the diverse Christian tradition? We must draw on texts beyond the canon so as to broaden the range of those voices that we hear within our communities of faith.

Our **lectionaries and liturgical resources** will need a thorough overhaul. We must draw widely on texts within and outside the canon. We can use Scripture in different ways than those we have favored in the past. We need to move beyond text as content—information or correct ideas—and discover text as dialogue. We must rediscover myth and symbol in reading biblical texts, and help our people to escape the leaden touch of literalism.

## **Church as Inclusive Community**

### *The Problem*

The communities that comprise church have been **tamed as instruments of the powerful**. We are *no longer communities with an alternative vision of life*.

Churches rarely speak for real people (who are mostly absent in any case these days). We rarely serve as vehicles for their hopes and hurts. Our structures are collapsing under weight of their own baggage as our memberships age and decline.

*Jesus and inclusive koinonia*

The contrast with the historical Jesus is pretty clear: the sign of cross that decorates our churches spells it out! It is the price of integrity. There were neither national nor imperial flags in his meeting rooms. God's domain belonged to those who did not fit in with others' expectations. The communities formed by his followers could not be co-opted by any empire—at least, not for 300 years or so!!

Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza has commented on one aspect of the community formed around the historical Jesus. He is remembered as calling this mixed bag of humanity “my brothers, my sisters, my mother” (cf. Mark 3:31-35 // Thom 99). No mention of a “father” in that list. No patriarchs in the community of God's rule, since God alone has authority as “Abba.” Instead, a community of equals gathered around the common table of life.

*Opportunity*

As the old ways of being church collapse we have an opportunity to develop new forms of being church: ways that **set the people of God free**. We can—and must—develop forms of community as people of faith that are free from co-option by ruling powers (including grants from foundations and government agencies). They will be communities free from clerical ownership (and thus require a fundamental rethink of the role of clergy). Most importantly, they must be communities of freedom: places where it is safe to be as a human person—somewhere to doubt as well as to believe, somewhere to make mistakes, as well as to grow in grace.

*Agenda*

One of the features of the future church that reflects the character of Jesus is clear: this will be **a lay church**. Can we imagine churches without brokers? Are we willing to work for lay ownership with new structures? Can we imagine a role for clergy that celebrates leadership and vision, but does not assume that power—and payrolls—should be limited to the ordained?

The dominant paradigm for a church that reflects the vision of Jesus will be **mission centers, not franchises** in a denominational corporation. Communities of faith will form around areas and aspects of mission, rather than serving the corporate strategies of religious institutions seeking to retain and expand their market share.

Typically, they will be **coalitions for justice** rather than preaching posts. The focus of churches will move from salvation for the next world to wholeness in this life. We will take creation and incarnation themes seriously, and reject Gnostic dualism that denigrates the material and terrestrial aspects of life. We will heed Micah 6:8: What does the Lord require ... kindness, justice, humility!

Our faith communities will be places where we can be **fully and wholly human**. As reflections of God's holy mountain in prophetic mythology, they will be places where no-one hurts or destroys. As therapeutic and wholesome communities there will be no psychological distortion. It will be safe to make mistakes and test life options within those kinds of communities. There will be freedom to come and go as people feel appropriate for their own spiritual journeys.

## **Worship as Celebration**

### *The Problem*

As many of us are painfully aware, worship is **losing its character as community celebration**. It reflects the churches' loss of significance in the wider community. This is possibly not yet so profound in USA, but it is dramatic in the UK and Europe—and has always been so in Australia: even if now seen more (eg in the alienation from church life of those seeking Baptisms and Weddings).

*Sadly worship is too often centered around the symbols and concerns of a long lost world.*

### *Jesus and organized religion*

Jesus **lived within a religious tradition** we've been taught to disdain. He was nurtured by a tradition still linked to the everyday concerns of his community. This is not to say that he was uncritical of organized and doctrinaire forms of religion, but it is to warn ourselves to put aside traditional Christian stereotypes of a legalistic and barren Judaism. We find it too easy—and self-serving—to project Paul's critique of Torah back onto Jesus.

Unlike Paul and many of his later interpreters, Jesus does not seem to have had a jaundiced view of the Torah. Authentic sayings such as

Adam and Eve were not created for the Sabbath,  
But the Sabbath was created for Adam and Eve

suggest that Jesus understood the law as a divine gift intended for the benefit and enjoyment of humanity. Observance of such a law can never be a burden. But neither can it intrude between a person in real need and some timely relief. Time and again, the early Jesus tradition portrays Jesus as invoking an interpretation of Torah observance that presupposes **integrity** rather than literal compliance.

This is also seen in an orphan saying only preserved in the version of Luke 6:5 found in *Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis* (5 c./6 c.). In this saying, otherwise unattested in the tradition, we read:

That day [Jesus] saw someone working on the Sabbath and said to him, "Mister, if you know what you are doing you are to be congratulated; but if not, damn you for violating Torah!"

In commenting on this text, Patterson remarks:

the issue for Jesus was integrity. The purpose of piety is to give expression to one's relationship with God. Pious practice should therefore be done in such a way that this relationship is expressed adequately, reflecting both the compassionate loving character of God on the one hand, and the transformative effect of knowing such a God on the other. (p. 102f)

Let's apply that principle from the historical Jesus to our liturgies as the people of God.

### *Opportunity*

After centuries of rigidity we have new opportunities to **renew and reform our liturgies**. We have access to new understandings of Scripture and Tradition. We also have a new appreciation of human nature, as well as of the power of symbol and myth. We enjoy fresh understandings of the universe and our place in the cosmos. And we have access to multi-cultural and multi-faith perspectives not available to earlier generations of liturgists.

### *Agenda*

Worship that reflects the heritage of Jesus will be marked by **celebration, not judgment**. We will move away from guilt and anxiety. Instead, we shall celebrate and affirm. We will also acknowledge evil and failure, but do so within a positive frame as people who know forgiveness. We will embrace a broader range of life events/themes to be celebrated, and we will develop new symbols for use in our worship.

Our liturgy will be **truly inclusive**. After all, “liturgy is the price we pay for community.” (R.W. Funk) We will pay attention to the question of who our liturgies are supposed to serve: the clergy, the faithful, the lapsed, the enquirer, casual attenders? Adults and children? Those who know how deeply they are broken, and those denying their brokenness? We will draw on music, art and architecture. Natural spaces and constructed spaces. We will move into cyberspace and form various virtual communities.

And we shall **escape Sunday morning!** There is a long tradition of weekday worship in Catholic and Anglican communities, but Sunday still exercises an hegemony over church life—and especially in the morning. Too often, worship competes with recreational options (not previously available to people), and clashes with work and family commitments. It is too easy to blame those who skip church for sporting and cultural events. We need to ask ourselves what is the point of religion: to deny life, or to embrace and enrich it?

## **Discipleship as Faith integrated with Life**

### *The Problem*

For too many people—within the churches and outside them—faith or discipleship (ie, “being a Christian”) is seen as assent to doctrines and morals. Assenting to particular (and mostly incredible) beliefs, and behaving in certain (and mostly conservative) ways, have come to be seen as fundamental to Christian identity.

Worse, there has been a collapse of the essential link between values (or faith) and everyday life. William Diehl identifies four domains in which religious faith needs to be connected with praxis in everyday life: Family; Local Community; Employment (those paid or unpaid ways we spend our days); National and global concerns. Those who are most strident in their insistence that Christians must assent to particular doctrines or behave within specific constraints are often not alert to the need to get coherence between core values and everyday life, with its various domains. A faith that does not connect with the stuff of real life does not have much hope of transforming our world.

### *Jesus and discipleship*

As a window into the perspective of the historical Jesus, let's take the well known encounter with the "**rich young ruler**." This guy had it all, but he did not have what he needed. I conclude from this episode—along with many others in the authentic Jesus materials—that **beliefs** and **behavior** both matter, but they are **not central** to God's domain.

What is needed is **willingness to put oneself at risk**. Those called to discipleship were not called to a formula, but to an open ended journey into the unknown.

At this point the Jesus Seminar's conclusion that Jesus was not an apocalyptic preacher of doom is highly pertinent.

If there is one emphasis of the Seminar that appears to be unique within NT scholarship, it is perhaps our judgment that Jesus was not an apocalyptic firebrand, but more a teacher of sacred wisdom within the traditions of ancient Israel. This view arises not from a bias against apocalyptic, but from a close study of the parables and aphorisms that have the best case for being authentic.

What the Jesus Seminar has proposed is that the "voice print" of Jesus that emerges from a study of the parables and other sayings is one that seems to be in tension with the traditional representation of Jesus as an apocalyptic teacher. That conclusion is not accepted widely—as yet. But it is not found only among the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar. It is a significant minority report. It presents a distinctive alternative, and has shaped the recent debate in our field.

If we are correct, then the legacy of the historical Jesus is a glimpse of life as God's domain that is essentially affirming and celebratory. Rather than being negative and antagonistic towards a world seen in terms of opposites, our churches should be embracing and celebrating life.

We should earn the dreadful reputation of being friends of gays and sex workers. We should be known as people ready to celebrate and party at the least excuse. We should be talked about as communities that do not pretend to have all the answers, but have identified a handful of really important questions.

### *Opportunity*

While traditional church affiliation fades, religious faith persists. Indeed, there are new quests for meaning and coherence in lives and communities. This residual religious interest seen in "spirituality." If we stopped being so religious and became more authentically human, churches might indeed have a future rather than being leftovers from the past. We might even deserve a future!

### *Agenda*

The first priority is surely to fashion **communities of meaning and hope**. These will require us to work at creating and sustaining communities that get beyond formulae. They will be places where both beliefs and actions will matter, but even more valued will be the willingness to act out of trust into the future. In that kind of community people find meaning and hope, not answers or control.

Such communities will be marked by a **passionate spirituality**. We desperately need genuine religious practitioners; not people who think religion is (or was) a good thing. We must form the kind of communities that encourage people to identify, name and share their own experiences of the sacred. This involves a melding of the intellect and the spirit that takes both seriously.

Of course, faith communities of this kind will **integrate faith with life** in its various dimensions. Such communities will draw on the real life skills of their members, and learn to reflect on their shared experience. These communities will look outside their own lives. They will engage deeply in the issues and concerns of everyday life: as a church, as individuals and as clergy. Social justice cells will be as common place as prayer chains.

## CONCLUSION

So, **will progressive churches live or die?**

I cannot give an answer that question. But I do suggest that we have a better claim to life if we reshape our churches to reflect the new insights arising from historical Jesus studies.

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