ENROLLING AT THE SCHOOL OF HONESTY

Historical Jesus Studies and the Future of Christianity

Gregory C. Jenks

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In 1906, Albert Schweitzer described historical Jesus studies as a "school of honesty" for Christian theology. He was of the view that we reveal our own true selves when we set about the task of writing a Life of Jesus. He notes:

> … those who tried to bring Jesus to life at the call of love found it a cruel task to be honest. The critical study of the life of Jesus was a school of honesty for theology.
>
> (*The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, 7)

That observation comes from someone who had just reviewed the efforts, by various scholars over more than 100 years, to present a critical historical account of Jesus: what was he like, what did he say, what did he do, what did it all mean? It reminds us that coming face to face—or at least reasonably close—to the historical Jesus will not be a comfortable experience. The Jesus who trod the pathways of ancient Palestine 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.

With the explosion of human knowledge over the past 100 years, we perhaps need to adapt Schweitzer's metaphor. Critical study of the life of Jesus may indeed be a School of Honesty, but it is just one faculty within the University of Real Life. These days, Christian theology needs also to enrol concurrently in the Schools of Astronomy, Biological Sciences, Earth Sciences, and Psychology. Nor can we afford to ignore the insights from advancing human achievements in the Arts, Business, Information Technology, Cultural Studies, and the Social Sciences.

In this lecture I will focus mostly on the curriculum for Christian renewal offered through the School of Historical Jesus Studies, but we should not allow that to blind us to the need for sustained effort in all of the other areas of research and performance.

I have structured this address around three sets of issues, each of which has five core points. The three sets can be briefly identified as follows—

- ✓ Where do we now find ourselves?
- ✓ How did we get here?
- ✓ What lies ahead? (Or, Where do we go from here?)

There are lots of other issues that could have been addressed, but I think these will allow me to open up the general question of how historical Jesus studies impact on our shared task of being reflective practitioners of the Christian faith in our kind of world. More importantly, by addressing the issues in this way, I hope to lay the basis for the question and discussion time that will follow, as I find that is where we actually get to talk about the issues that interest and concern you (rather than what I estimate will be your interests).

So this is not a talk followed by a few minutes of questions. Rather, I hope we are starting on an eyes-wide-open discussion of what Jesus can and does mean for the future of our religious faith, for which my remarks are designed to set the scene and open up some of the issues.

ONE: WHERE WE NOW FIND OURSELVES

The first set of issues, then, concerns where we now find ourselves? What is the current state of play with historical research into Jesus? Allowing for the fact that some of the details are still contested in the scholarship, what are the broad outlines of Jesus as reconstructed by critical historians?

In his 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. 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.
>
> (*The God of Jesus*, xii)

Patterson is highlighting how significant movement 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.

Believers in exile

Addressing related issues but from another perspective, Bishop John Shelby Spong uses the metaphor of exile to capture what many people of faith sense in today's society and church.

Spong's phrase "believers in exile" strikes a chord for many of us. We ask, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

If—as is mostly the case—we have been cross-enrolled in any of the other faculties of the University of Real Life, we know just how strange a place the emerging global world is for a performance of the song of faith.

While our prayer books do not always reflect it, we know that bush fire, drought and floods—along with "sorrow, need, sickness [and] any other trouble"—are entirely the results of natural conditions and human choices. Their causes are not to be assigned to God, nor is she to be expected to fix them on our behalf.

The conservative choirmaster tells us to practice our plainsong, straighten our cassocks, and sing more heartily. In a different tradition we might be advised to pray harder, sing louder, have more faith, give more. You get the point.

Some of us have tried that. And for some it works—or so it seems. But for others that is no solution at all. Some of us find that speaking religious language—even the language of Bible and Creed—no longer works.

This is not to doubt the reality of the sacred, but it is to question the traditional uses to which we have put the word *God*. It is also to appeal for ways of speaking the language of faith that are meaningful in the modern world. And it necessarily involves a reconsideration of the figure of Jesus.

Contemporary Jesus research is as much the *result* of a spiritual revolution within (and beyond) the churches as it is a *cause* of spiritual turmoil. This is not to deny the validity of historical Jesus research, but simply to acknowledge its role as one expression of the vibrant spiritual questing that is shaking our assumptions about an eternal gospel and an age-less liturgy.

For Christians such as myself, critical Jesus scholarship that addresses both the historical data as well as the spiritual significance of Jesus both before and after Easter, is an indicator that such a new lexicon of faith is perhaps possible—and may even have antecedents in the person of Jesus himself.

So we come to my first set of five points: a thumbnail sketch of Jesus as seen through the lens of current historical studies.

First, though, a reminder that any satisfactory account of the historical Jesus has to be able to address each of the following three issues:

- ✓ What did Jesus think he was doing?
- ✓ Why was he killed?
- ✓ The post-Easter development of the Christian church(es).

So keep those three litmus tests in mind as I suggest my personal five-point description of Jesus. I think this description does address all three adequately, but I welcome your comments and questions when we get to that part of the evening.

First of all, I would stress the character of Jesus as **a first-century Jewish saint**.

Saint is a loaded word, but I am using it intentionally to get us to think of Jesus alongside of and among the diverse company of truly spiritual women and men who are bearers of the Spirit, windows of the Sacred. As a human being, he was one of us. As a saint, he was one of our best. He is not without parallel or peer, but part of a wider and richer human legacy as a Spirit-person.

In the case of Jesus, we are dealing with a *Jewish* saint. Here is a man of the Spirit who was entirely shaped and sustained by the religious tradition of the Second Temple period, and who lived out his own response to the Sacred within the ancient Jewish social world. He was not anti-Jewish, nor would he have found the religion of his society to be barren and unsatisfying. It nurtured him. It fed his sense of the Sacred. It shaped his vision of what life could be within the imperial rule of God, the divine commonwealth: *basileia*, the society where God rules, OK!

Secondly, I recognize that Jesus' vision of the divine *basileia* involved him in a radical critique of many key dynamics of his society. As a **social critic and reformer**, Jesus expressed his insight into the intimate presence of God in the subversive wisdom of his parables and aphorisms; in the experience of healing and wholeness that seems to have been a hallmark of his company; in a celebration of extravagant forgiveness; in welcoming the full participation of those usually left out of polite society in his time; and in meals where everyone was indeed welcome and there were no reserved seats.

As Bruce Chilton suggests in his *Rabbi Jesus: An Intimate Biography*, Jesus may have moved beyond the radical movement of John the Baptist—which offered those preparing to worship in the temple a public purification ritual in the Jordan River as an alternative to the official (and expensive) ritual baths in Jerusalem. Rather than focus on alternative purity rites, Jesus seems to have undercut both the Baptist and the Temple cult when he celebrated the presence of the holy in the unclean messiness of everyday life: declaring sins forgiven, pronouncing people well, gathering them at tables to eat and drink in celebration.

Thirdly, this profoundly spiritual first-century Jew—with no patience for those institutions and persons who claimed to stand between God and the people—generated **an alternative society** with no privileged leaders and no distinguished heroes. The citizens of this divine empire were a most ordinary lot! My Jesus Seminar colleague, Mahlon Smith, has described the divine commonwealth as a "kingless kingdom," a "beggars' opera" and an "unsupervised kindergarten" in which there are no carers on duty! Mahlon notes with fine irony:

> Jesus, for his part, did not volunteer to act as supervisor of such urchins. Instead of posing as a teacher, Jesus thanked his Abba for revealing to infants, i.e., children who are not ready for any instruction, what sages *per se* cannot see.

This is an aspect of the historical Jesus that we find so hard to accept. Jesus was not feigning humility when he denied messianic pretensions or divine status. He did not see himself as a hero, and was not secretly reciting the Nicean Creed under his breath. No one was to be called "Lord" or "Father." The essence of *basileia* was *diakonia*—simple service without status or reward It was then and it is now.

Fourthly, Jesus was **killed because his personal spiritual vision**, with its critique of contemporary privilege and abuse, **had begun to capture the imagination of the crowd**. What would happen to the leaders if ordinary people actually started to think of themselves in the way that Jesus suggested? What if the *basileia tou theou* was to be found in the shared life of the common people rather than in the comfortable privilege of the powerful? Even if it was an illusion, what if people started to act as if it were true?

As a classic or—as Christians affirm—the classic instance of the ancient motif of the innocent victim, Jesus accepted martyrdom as the price of faithfulness. He had no pretensions that his death would be an event with cosmic significance. He simply sensed that this fate was to be accepted as his destiny. To do anything else would have been to deny his own vision of the divine *basileia*. He would die unjustly, as millions have done before and since. And he did.

Finally, the murder of Jesus was **insufficient to quench the insights** that his life had opened for people. The *basileia* community that had begun to experience living with just the daily bread that the Abba provided them found that this was still the case. The sick continued to be healed. The subversive wisdom of God's holiness present in and among the everyday continued to be shared. Sinners continued to be forgiven. When they gathered at table they still sensed his presence with them.

His death did not mark the end of the dream. Instead, his significance as the one whose faithfulness even to death had revealed the reality of the *basileia* as their shared experience, came to be celebrated in a diversity of early "Christologies"—many (most?) of which eventually were ruled heretical by the oddity of church hierarchy in league with the empire of Rome in the fourth and fifth centuries.

You can judge to what extent you find such a description of Jesus' life to be a satisfactory account of his intentions, his death and the emergence of Christianity on this side of Easter.

It is, I submit, a reasonable account of the broad outcomes of contemporary historical Jesus studies. That is not to say that it would pass uncontested, or to deny that there is ongoing debate about some aspects of the basic historical reconstruction. However, it indicates—in broad terms—where we find ourselves when we ask what historical Jesus studies tell us about Jesus.

TWO: HOW DID WE GET TO THIS POINT?

Before considering the implications of such a view of Jesus for the future of Christianity in its third millennium, it may help to trace the principal influences that have shaped such a view. This will not only illuminate the intellectual underbelly of current historical Jesus research, but will also clarify some of the possible through roads and potential cul-de-sacs as we look for a way forward.

Again, let me preface the next set of five points with a description: this time of ascendant Christianity, safe in the bosom of the Emperor.

Approximately 300 years after the death of Jesus, the Christian religion was embraced by Constantine as he took total power within the declining Roman Empire. Under imperial patronage the public fortunes of Christianity soared. Eusebius, the Bishop of Caesarea and a confidante of the Emperor, has left us glowing descriptions in his *Life of the Blessed Emperor Constantine*—

> *How Constantine entertained the Bishops on the occasion of his vicennalia.*
> About this time he completed the twentieth year of his reign. [29]On this occasion public festivals were celebrated by the people of the provinces generally, but the emperor himself invited and feasted with those ministers of God whom he had reconciled, and thus offered as it were through them a suitable sacrifice to God. Not one of the bishops was wanting at the imperial banquet, [30]the circumstances of which were splendid beyond description. Detachments of the body-guard and other troops surrounded the entrance of the palace with drawn swords, and through the midst of these the men of God proceeded without fear into the innermost of the imperial apartments, in which some were the emperor's own companions at table, while others reclined on couches arranged on either side. [31]One might have thought that a picture of Christ's kingdom was thus shadowed forth, and a dream rather than reality. [Book III Chapter XV]

For a church safe in the imperial embrace, perhaps Jesus had to be imagined in regal terms. For a faith seeking to find its place once more in the discourse of the University of Real Life, the fading icon of Christ the King has to be taken down from the wall and a simpler sketch put in its place. How has such a change come about?

First of all, we have found that we can no longer fudge the question of how **the pre-Easter Jesus** relates to what Jesus became—after Easter—in the imagination and devotion of Christians. This is not simply the old undergraduate theology question about the importance of the Jesus of history rather than the Christ of faith. It is not about choosing between a "real Jesus" who said and did certain things, and a "spiritual Christ" who is created out of the developing faith and theology of the Christian tradition.

The issue is more to do with accepting the particular historical character of Jesus as a pre-Christian Jewish saint, and coming to terms with the fact that he may not be acceptable within—nor may he wish to join—our church. It involves the historical otherness of Jesus: his attitudes, his cultural assumptions, and his own religious choices.

It is recognising that we cannot, and should not, domesticate Jesus to fit in with the ethos of our faith community. It includes recognizing that being a Christian today may require decisions that he never faced, and would never have chosen. To put it another way, being a Christian today is not so much about doing what Jesus did back then, as in catching his vision of God's *basileia* as the fundamental reality in our lives and deciding what it is that we have to do now.

And it is about refraining from projecting back onto Jesus all of our theological baggage about Jesus and God.

We may not, in the end, be able to say very much about the historical Jesus. But even to know that is to know a great deal. And the most significant thing that we can know about Jesus is that he was very different from the ways in which Christian dogma and piety have imagined him.

Secondly, we have begun to recognize that the earliest traditions about Jesus already exhibit **considerable diversity**.

This diversity includes the well-known differences between the Synoptic Jesus and the Johannine Jesus.

Synoptics	**John**
Active mostly in Galilee	Active mostly in/around Jerusalem
Opposed to Scribes, Pharisees	Opposed by "the Jews"
Typical concern: Sabbath	Typical concern: Jewish festivals
1 adult Passover	3 Passovers
Duration:12–18 months (?)	Duration: 2–3 years (?)

Infancy traditions	Logos hymn
Baptism by JBap described	Baptism by JBap assumed
Temptation	Gethsemane
Teacher/prophet	Divine revealer
Son of Man	Son of God
Aphorisms, parables	Complex discourses
Exorcisms feature	No exorcisms in John
Healings & miracles ("deeds")	Healings & miracles ("signs")
Kingdom of God	Eternal Life, True Knowledge
Message is the focus	Jesus himself is the focus
Concern for poor & powerless	Concern for those in darkness & sin
Transfiguration is glorification	Lifting up on Cross is a glorification
Last Supper narrative	Bread of Heaven discourse in ch 6
Jesus' feet washed by the woman	Foot Washing of disciples by Jesus
Final Teaching: Eschatological	Final Teaching: Discipleship & the Spirit
Silence during Trial	Discourse with Pilate
Key characters: Peter, James & John	Andrew, Philip, Nathanael, Nicodemus, Lazarus, Joseph of Arimathea, Thomas, Mary Magdalene, Jesus' mother

This diversity in early Christian descriptions of Jesus extends to include the evidence from non-canonical Christian writings, such as the *Gospel of Thomas*. In principle it extends even to much later Muslim traditions that may preserve ancient Christian accounts of Jesus. When seeking to get a sense of what Jesus may actually have been like, or even what he was *not* like, canonical boundaries based on later theological judgments have no significance. We do not limit ourselves to the NT texts when looking for evidence about the historical Jesus.

That diversity extends, as well, to pre-canonical sources such as the *Sayings Gospel Q*. It is surely of great significance for historical studies of Jesus if there was an early account of Jesus that saw no need to include even a hint of his death and resurrection, but understood Jesus as a prophet calling Israel to repentance.

The early and original diversity in the Christian interpretations of Jesus suggests that the trend to a single and unified account of Jesus was a later process, and itself the expression of internal struggles for influence and control.

The third factor that has played such a role in moving us from traditional representations of Jesus to the more recent historical portraits is an emphasis on **the sayings of Jesus** rather than the deeds of Jesus.

This brings us to one of the most distinctive things about the work of the Jesus Seminar. Generally speaking, neither the methods nor the conclusions of the Seminar are especially remarkable in modern NT studies. In any case, in our better moments we recognize that many—if not all—of our findings will be revised 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 important earlier 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.

That bias towards the sayings found among scholars, is reflected as well in popular interest. 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 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 the literal meaning of the resurrection. While the ascension is simply out of our world entirely.

But we still want to think that there is wisdom in the words of Jesus. We may consider the rest of the tradition to be bath water, but we like to 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 McGaughy 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!

I note in passing three other features of the sayings material, since they relate to the question of diversity in the early Jesus traditions:

- ✓ The sayings judged authentic by the Jesus Seminar correlate strongly to the material in *Q* and *Thomas* that other scholars date to the earliest history of those collections. This reinforces the possibility that we are dealing with very old elements of the Jesus tradition in the sayings.
- ✓ These sayings collections typically stress Jesus as a teacher of divine wisdom, rather than as a hero who dies for his people or as a sacrifice for sin. They belong to what John Dominic Crossan calls the "Life Tradition" rather than to the "Death Tradition." This suggests they are survivors from an earlier version of Christianity before the atonement juggernaut flattened other interpretations of Jesus.
- ✓ In addition, the authentic early sayings tend not to have a strongly apocalyptic flavor. This suggests that the marked apocalyptic character that we find in the Synoptic Gospels may reflect the views of the Christian authors rather than the original teachings of Jesus.

Fourthly, in recent historical Jesus studies there is a focus on looking for a Jesus that fits well with what we know of **Judaism in the first century**, rather than seeking coherence with the Christology of the fourth-century creeds.

This aspect takes us closer to the classic theological dilemma of choosing between the Jesus of history or the Christ of faith. In critical scholarship, with its emancipation from doctrinal and ecclesial controls, that is a simple choice. When seeking to reconstruct the historical figure of Jesus we are looking for a Jew from ancient Palestine, not the second Person of the Trinity.

Thanks to an avalanche of archaeological and literary discoveries during the twentieth century, we are rather better placed to appreciate both the diversity of Second Temple Judaism and also the ways in which a Jewish saint such as Jesus could have plausibly operated in that setting.

Incidentally, the same principle increasingly applies to studies of Paul the Apostle. A Jewish NT scholar such as Alan Segal can appreciate Paul as the only first-century Pharisee to have left us his own writings. He is thus an invaluable source for understanding Judaism in the first century.

Neither Jesus nor Paul ever repudiated their Jewish identity and religious traditions. They would doubtless be surprised and shocked to see how their legacy has been used against the Jewish people. Christian anti-Semitism is a tragic betrayal of the spiritual genius of both men.

Finally, in this second set of five issues, we must note the **collapse of the church monopoly** over the Jesus tradition in the modern world.

There was a time when the only people really interested in Jesus were Christians. Or, at least, that is what we tended to think. The situation was never that clear, of course.

In ancient times there were those who came to be labelled "Gnostics" and "heretics." Their interests in Jesus were maligned and misrepresented by those concerned to impose a singular orthodoxy on the diverse Jesus tradition.

Pagans and infidels were assumed not to have any legitimate interest in Jesus.

The irony of this becomes clear as soon as we read the poetry of Rumi, or dip into popular writings from the early Islamic period. Just as Christians have had to find a way to integrate Abraham, Moses and David—not to mention John the Baptist—into our religious tradition, so Muslims have had to come to terms with Jesus as a significant figure from another religion who also plays a key role in their own faith.

A similar need to accommodate the Christ figure of the dominant Western culture has also meant that Hindus and Buddhists have an interest in making sense of Jesus. Who is this person with such a pervasive influence in the West? How does the reading of the Sacred which his tradition represents relate to their own ways of reading the Sacred?

Of course, it is Jews more than any other community that have a particular interest in Jesus. After centuries of mutual fear and recrimination, Jewish scholars are emerging from the shadow of the ghetto to reclaim Jesus as the most important Jewish figure of all time. And that despite the horrific legacy of Christian anti-Semitism that has been such a tragedy to them and such a shame to us.

New Age seekers and Jack Spong's widespread "church alumni association" also have their own stake in making sense of Jesus. They no longer recognize our claims to have a monopoly over the Jesus label in the religion market. We no longer decide who can invoke his legacy.

In a sense, the success of the once-Christian West in imposing our cultural norms on the other two-thirds of humanity means that we have exported Jesus as cultural icon into the emerging global society. The churches find ourselves as the traditional brand owners, but no longer with a legal title that others recognize as conferring exclusive rights to Jesus.

The modern quest for the historical Jesus may have been triggered by the spiritual needs of European Christians, but it is now of interest to a kaleidoscope of peoples and communities few of whom are concerned to defend traditional Christian doctrines.

THREE: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

That brief rehearsal of the dynamics underlying our current historical picture of Jesus, also suggests that there is no going back. The way to the future does not lie through the 1950s, or the 1550s. Our only option is to press ahead and to see whether there is a future for Jesus and the community that has found itself the custodian of his *basileia* vision.

Let me offer some suggestions about the features that we may find are the hallmarks of a journey into the future of Christianity, as distinct from a retreat into our past. Again, I will offer a set of five issues.

First of all, we are already finding ourselves in a time of **profound and irreversible change**.

Loren Mead has suggested that the changes presently happening in Christianity are the most far-reaching since the conversion of Constantine in the fourth century. The Reformation was a struggle for supremacy between the traditional Mediterranean heartland of the Roman world and its outlying provinces. Neither Catholics nor Reformers looked for structural change in the relations of the faith community to the secular order. Both sides were quick to suppress the radicals who challenged the power of Bishop/Pastor/Elder.

But we now find ourselves beset with changes and challenges at many different levels. The princes and their business mogul successors no longer need the churches. Traditional theism is under siege as a new story of origins displaces Genesis and requires a radical rethink of our place as humans within the web of life. What value an incarnate superhuman Christ figure in a universe that is 15 billion years old, and where the dynamics of quantum theory suggest no entity within or beyond the universe can either foretell or control the future?

To cite Mead again, we find ourselves "pulled by the new but constrained by the old."

Yet it is the old that must inevitably make way for the new. The past cannot set the terms of the future. Joe Bessler-Northcutt urges a public theology that takes the historical Jesus seriously:

> Disciplined historical reconstructions of Jesus' words and acts are a compelling resource for restating the gospel of Jesus. … the intellectual and moral limitations of classical theology make clear that these classical traditions must not be imposed as a criterion for contemporary faithfulness.
>
> ("The Theological Risks of Taking Jesus Seriously," *Westar Seminar Papers*, Fall 2001, 31)

Stephen Patterson, whose work was cited at the beginning of this address, also speaks of the need for far-reaching change as the churches take on board the results of historical Jesus research. 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.
> (*The God of Jesus*, xii)

Patterson embraces 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. (*The God of Jesus*, xiii)

Secondly, as we begin to focus on the **implications of religion scholarship**—in all its forms—for the future of our faith communities we shall find that we are talking more about the *basileia* Jesus pointed to and less about the Jewish saint who teaches us about it. Instead of defending claims of Jesus' uniqueness and extraordinary character, we will celebrate his particular historical human existence as the location of those profound *basileia* insights that are the special spiritual heart of Christian faith.

Incarnation will come to be understood not as an invasion of nature by the supernatural, but as a re-location of the divine reality from out there to here among us. As Jesus glimpsed the *basileia* of Israel's covenant God beyond the sacred precincts of the Temple, so we may yet have eyes to see Immanuel in the ordinary things of life.

We will continue to honor Jesus as the one whose faithfulness makes possible the way of faith that we now walk. Not because he died to take away sins, but because he lived enthusiastically into the *basileia* vision right up to and beyond his own personal death. His death will matter because it is the seal and culmination of how he lived, not as some cosmic plea bargain with a distant deity.

In all of this, it seems to me, the focus will move from Jesus to God. And to God as the Sacred that we experience in our midst when we form and sustain *basileia* communities, cells of life where God's rule is turned from theory into practice.

As Brandon Scott suggests, rather than *believing IN Jesus*, we shall find ourselves *believing ALONG WITH* Jesus:

> Ultimately, we have faith not in Jesus, but faith with Jesus. In the re-inagined world of the parables we stand beside Jesus and trust that his world will work … Jesus is our companion on the journey, not our Lord and Master.
>
> ("Living in a Re-imagined World." *The Fourth R* 14/5 [Sep/Oct 2001], 19)

Thirdly, we shall learn to live with **theological diversity** beyond what we have ever known in the past.

Anglicans have a proud legacy as church that sustains *koinonia* even in the face of deeply-held differences that have usually divided Christians into warring factions. That is a legacy that we are struggling to live up to in the present era, but I think we have only just begun to discover the degree of diversity that we must learn to embrace.

Richard Holloway has used the term "ethical jazz" to describe the way in which we must now live our lives as a creative performance of the Gospel values. I think we are moving into a period of "jazz theology" in which diverse renditions of the Lord's song will be played in the concert of faith. The formal classic renditions of that song no longer touch the soul.

Dean Andrew Furlong in Ireland has recently fallen victim to the dilemma that such a reality presents a faith community with a long and complex story. He has called, perhaps naively, for recognition of diversity in faith and practice that goes beyond variations in liturgical texts or compromises over the ordination of women. He has recognized that perhaps the time has not yet come for such diversity, but he is doubtless correct in sensing that it will come sooner or later.

We will eventually recognize that some individuals and communities who reject doctrines and practices that we consider essential to Christian identity are nonetheless *basileia* communities that have the character of Christ. Not so long ago, many of us refused to recognize the Salvation Army as a church because they lacked Baptism and Eucharist. Who would do that now? Can we really deny that the Mormons have the Spirit of Christ? Or Unitarians?

Sooner or later—and I pray it is sooner—we will find the courage to acknowledge that our sacred stories are all fictive, all human constructs; but no less real for all of that. They are culturally specific and come with a shelf life. But they reflect the deep structures of reality as best we can comprehend them, and they can be instruments of grace for our personal and collective journeys.

Given that we are all at different places in our journeys, we are not going to find a single set of beliefs and practices that can serve as the wellspring of life for us. In the happy absence of coercive powers to impose a Constantinian—or an Elizabethan, or a Jacobean—Settlement upon us all, we are going to have to find a way to live with diversity.

Fourthly, the way forward is to be **life-affirming** rather than obsessed with the Cross.

At this point I am consciously drawing on the work of two current Roman Catholic scholars: John Dominic Crossan, and Elizabeth A. Johnson.

One of the things Crossan has done is to draw attention to the programmatic difference between what he calls the "Life Tradition" and the "Death Tradition." He intends those labels to be taken as simple indicators of the characteristic focus on the respective ways of interpreting the meaning of Jesus. The Death Tradition was especially interested in the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection as the key to his significance. The Life Tradition, on the other hand, was more interested in what Jesus said and how he acted during his lifetime.

Those emphases are not irreconcilable opposites, as each must concede the reality of the other for its own sake. Without a life lived as teacher and healer, there would be no death. And the prophet's fate awaited the one who taught and acted in such a manner as Jesus.

While they are not unrelated to one another, it remains true that the Death Tradition has come to dominate in classical Christian theology. An interest in what Jesus said and did plays second fiddle to the atoning death of the incarnate Son of God.

Elizabeth Johnson has identified this as one area of Christian thought where historical Jesus research can make an important contribution. I think it also a point where we see a different set of priorities emerging for the future church than has often been the case in the past.

Johnson notes that the NT uses a diverse set of metaphors to speak about what Jesus did "for us"—

- ✓ *business* metaphors: buying, redeeming, ransoming
- ✓ *medical* metaphors: healing and wholeness
- ✓ *legal* metaphors: justification or acquittal
- ✓ *political* metaphors: liberation, deliverance, freedom
- ✓ *military* metaphors: victory over the opposing powers
- ✓ *cultic* metaphors: sacrifices, atonement
- ✓ *relational* metaphors: dividing walls removed, proximity after distance
- ✓ *family* metaphors: adoption as children

However, in Western theology sacrificial atonement has displaced that earlier diversity with an overwhelming emphasis on Jesus' death as a sacrifice to take away sins. She comments:

> The metaphor's narrative focus on the cross … leads to the idea that death was the very purpose of Jesus' life. He came to die; the script was already written before he stepped onto the world stage. This not only robs Jesus of his human freedom, but it sacralizes suffering more than joy as an avenue to God. It tends to glorify violent death as somehow of value. ("The Word was Made Flesh," 156)

Johnson suggests that Jesus research can help redress that imbalance in Western theology. An interest in the historical Jesus means that we value the whole of Jesus' life and ministry, not just his final hours. Jesus' death can then be seen as what happened to the prophet sent by God when historical human actors made free decisions in particular contingent circumstances. To quote Johnson again:

> To put it simply, Jesus, far from being a masochist, came not to die but to live and to help others live in the joy of the divine love. To put it boldly, God the Creator and Lover of the human race did not need Jesus' death as an act of atonement but wanted him to flourish in his ministry of the coming reign of God. Human sin thwarted this divine desire yet did not defeat it. ("The Word was Made Flesh," 158)

Such a view of salvation is radical. Can we imagine a Christian theology where the death of Jesus is a tragic turn of events rather than an eternal plan of God? Where redemption is based on the love of God glimpsed in the faithfulness of the living Jesus, rather than the innocent suffering of the crucified one?

If we can, then our focus moves from Jesus to God, from death to life. We are able to reject any suggestion that oppression and injustice should be borne stoically as God-given destinies, and we can find the power to resist evil even if (like Jesus) we may not succeed.

> Part of the difficulty with the atonement/satisfaction metaphor, especially as it has played out in a juridical context, lies in the way it valorized suffering. Rather than being something to be resisted or remedied in light of God's will for human well-being, suffering is seen as a good in itself or even an end necessary for God's honor. … Not only has this led to masochistic tendencies in piety … but … it has promoted acceptance of suffering resulting from injustice rather than energizing resistance. ("The Word was Made Flesh," 159)

A future Christianity shaped by an appreciation of the life of Jesus rather than being transfixed by the spectacle of the Cross will be far more interested in social justice than theological precision. In Latin America, in Poland and in South Africa, we have already seen how such a focus transforms the place of religion in society. I predict it will be much more prominent in the church of the future.

Finally, and as a consequence of all that has been said so far, the church of the future will be far **more pluralistic** than the church of the past.

The neat certainties of the Fathers and the Reformers are gone, including the idea that salvation is only to be found within the church. Rather than presuming to tell others that their way to the Sacred must be the same as ours, we will affirm the wisdom that other religious traditions offer humanity.

I can be brief here as we shall have a further opportunity to consider these issues tomorrow evening. My topic then will be: *What about the neighbours? An agenda for affection in a world of many faiths."*

Suffice to say that we are moving beyond a "one-size-fits-all" approach to faith. And that is a particular challenge to Anglicans, for whom the Act of Uniformity and common worship using an officially sanctioned Prayer Book remain powerful ideals.

The Anglican Church that spoke with a single voice passed from our world some time ago. In fact, we have long since learned to accommodate very different understandings of faith within the broad church of Anglicanism. At times that is easier, or harder. At all times it is, I suspect, a sign of things to come.

But that too, it seems to me, can be understood as an authentic consequence of the ancient Jesus legacy. The Jesus who challenged the taboos and values of his own society unleashed a radical movement of social and theological experimentation. He will do no less if we let him loose once again within our faith community.

I conclude with the following comment from Elizabeth Johnson:

> They followed Jesus not by slavish imitation but by creative application of his values, imprinting his presence in new situations as best they could. Ever since, through a terribly messy history, the core dynamic has been the same. In the community of the church, the future of what Jesus started is being lived out. ... Down through the centuries we keep the "dangerous" memory of Jesus alive. ("The Word was Made Flesh," 161)

Let me repeat the key phrases:

In the community of the church, ***the future of what Jesus started*** *is being lived out.*

... Down through the centuries we keep the "dangerous" memory of Jesus alive.