

FROM THE HUMANITY OF CHRIST TO THE HISTORICAL JESUS

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[After delineating the process whereby Christology has undergone a paradigmatic shift in the past half-century, the author identifies two issues (made crucial by the Jesus Seminar), namely the meaning of the term "the historical Jesus" and its theological import. He reviews the debate on the topic led in the 1980s by David Tracy and Elizabeth Johnson. The subsequent collapse of the exegetical consensus that both authors presumed sheds new light on the issues. Finally, an analysis of what constitutes "the historical Jesus" clarifies the character and limits of the new christological paradigm.]

THE RAPID COLLAPSE and near disappearance of neo-Scholastic manual theology after Vatican II left Roman Catholic theologians with a massive task of reconstruction. The upshot has been, in the eyes of some, a period of creative ferment, while others look askance at a chaotic pluralism that in their view threatens the very substance of the faith. Within Christology, at least, enough clarity and unity of direction have emerged to allow John P. Galvin to speak of a paradigm shift.¹ Previously, the basic terms framing the problematic of the standard neo-Scholastic christological treatise were drawn from the dogmatic definition of the Council of Chalcedon. One sought first the intelligibility of the unity of Christ's two natures in his one person, and one then proceeded to elucidate the impact on his humanity that had been assumed by the divine person. That entire problematic, Galvin observed, has been subsumed and relocated of late within a new one, one now framed in terms of the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith.

Galvin rightly claimed paradigmatic significance for this shift. To cite

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¹ John P. Galvin, "From the Humanity of Christ to the Jesus of History: A Paradigm Shift in Catholic Christology," *Theological Studies* 55 (1994) 252-73.

Karl Rahner's imagery, a high, descending approach to Christology has been ceding place to a low, ascending approach.² Instead of taking as one's starting point the second person of the Trinity, the newer Christologies commonly begin with some consideration of Jesus' earthly career and destiny, and then proceed to reconstruct and rearticulate his religious significance. This approach involves them in a genetic analysis of the christological tradition from its origins in Jesus' ministry, execution, and Resurrection through the formation of the New Testament and onward.³ Within this genetic context, the dogmas of Nicea and Chalcedon are relocated as moments within an ongoing tradition, enormously significant moments, but by no means the end of the process. Thus the paradigm shift: Christology is no longer simply commentary on Chalcedon. Rather, the newer Christologies seek to recapitulate the entire tradition, beginning from Jesus' ministry, with a view finally toward mediating the significance of that tradition in the contemporary context, one often characterized as postmodern and distinguished by such concerns as race and gender, social and economic justice, ecology, cosmology, and the relationship of Christianity to Judaism and to other living faiths.

This shift began as a corrective movement within the former paradigm. Sparked by a recognition of the docetic and monophysitistic tendencies fostered by the standard neo-Scholastic manuals,⁴ there began a movement of recovering the full humanity of Jesus. In its initial phase that corrective movement drew on exegetical resources to retrieve from the New Testament portraits of Christ previously neglected features of his humanity, particularly limitations on his human knowledge.⁵ Contemporary philosophical developments were brought into play in order to reconcile those features with Christ's divine status.⁶ But when, in the early 1970s, Christology began to draw upon the results of research on the historical Jesus,⁷

² Karl Rahner, "The Two Basic Types of Christology," in *Theological Investigations* 13, trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury, 1975) 213–23.

³ Edward Schillebeeckx, for example, intended his *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, trans. H. Hoskins (New York: Seabury, 1979), "to enable the reader as it were to share in the process whereby full-fledged Christian belief—including his own—came into being."

⁴ Karl Rahner, "Current Problems in Christology," in *Theological Investigations* 1, trans. Cornelius Ernst (Baltimore: Helicon, 1961) 149–200, esp. 156, 179–80, 188.

⁵ For example, Raymond E. Brown, "How Much Did Jesus Know?" in *Jesus God and Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1967) 39–102.

⁶ Karl Rahner, "Dogmatic Reflections on the Knowledge and Self-Consciousness of Christ," in *Theological Investigations* 5, trans. K.-H. Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966) 193–215; Bernard Lonergan, "Christ as Subject: A Reply," in *Collection: Papers by Bernard Lonergan, S.J.*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967) 164–97.

⁷ See Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*; Walter Kasper's *Jesus The Christ*, trans. V.

the boundaries within which this corrective endeavor was carried on began to burst, giving way to the new paradigm noted by Galvin. Not infrequently, one may note further, the newer Christologies, operating from what Galvin terms “the reorientation of theological interest on the historical Jesus,”⁸ arrive as well at thoroughly revisionist interpretations of the dogma of the divinity of Christ.⁹

This paradigm shift is readily documented. Galvin cited well-known works by Schillebeeckx, Kasper, Küng, and McDermott, to which a large number of others could be added. In an article emblematic of this development, Monika Hellwig devoted her contribution to the 50th anniversary volume of *Theological Studies* to the “Re-emergence of the Human, Critical, Public Jesus,” a topic suggested by “a new wave of interest in grounding Christology more intensively, extensively, and attentively in the full human and historical reality of Jesus.”¹⁰

TWO FURTHER QUESTIONS

Granted the fact of Galvin’s paradigm shift, he also recognized that “many important theological dimensions of issues relative to the Jesus of history remain disputed and obscure.”¹¹ As I shall observe later, Galvin proceeded to comment on a series of particular issues. Two others, how-

Green (New York: Paulist, 1976); and Hans Küng, *On Being A Christian*, trans. E. Quinn (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976). All originally appeared in 1974.

⁸ Galvin, “From the Humanity” 257.

⁹ See, for example, Roger Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999). Haight’s work may be seen in continuity with that of Piet Schoonenberg, whose early publication, *The Christ*, trans. D. Couling (New York: Seabury, 1971), operated within the then dominant paradigm while attempting to secure Christ’s full humanity as it was being retrieved from the Gospel portraits in works such as Raymond E. Brown, *Jesus God and Man*. In the same work Schoonenberg proposed to reverse the classic doctrine of the anhypostatic character of Christ’s humanity: the previously non-personal *Logos* of God would become personal in the human person of Christ. Later, however, Schoonenberg suggested retrieving the New Testament Spirit Christology in hope of overcoming what he regarded as the aporias of the Chalcedonian framework; one notices also that at this stage of his development various results of the New Quest have come to inform his presentation of the human figure of Jesus. See his “Spirit Christology and Logos Christology,” *Bijdragen* 38 (1977) 350–75.

¹⁰ Monika Hellwig, “Re-emergence of the Human, Critical, Public Jesus,” *Theological Studies* 50 (1989) 466–80, at 466. In line with P. Schoonenberg, she suggests that the intelligibility of the Christian claim for Jesus’ divinity is best served by replacing personal models of his divine preexistence with impersonal models drawn from Scripture and tradition (480). Hellwig pointed to her own *Jesus the Compassion of God* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1983) for a fuller development of this line of thought.

¹¹ Galvin, “From the Humanity” 257.

ever, closely related to one another and more fundamental in character than those Galvin singled out, also emerge from his presentation. He was careful to characterize the paradigm shift as a “reorientation of theological interest on the historical Jesus,” and throughout his article he employed the phrases “the historical Jesus” and “Jesus of history” interchangeably. This broad usage was entirely appropriate to the purposes of Galvin’s article; at the same time it suggests further questions. First, “reorientation” and “theological interest” are very general terms, prompting one to ask in what more precisely this theological interest consists. Is it really a matter, for instance, of grounding Christology in the historical Jesus, as Hellwig might be taken to affirm? What is the theological and christological relevance of the project and results of research on the historical Jesus? Second, and closely related to this first question, what is meant by “the historical Jesus”?¹²

The Jesus Seminar’s Campaign

At present, clarity on these questions seems particularly urgent. Thanks in large measure to the efforts of the Jesus Seminar and its skill at attracting the attention of the media, research on the historical Jesus has become a topic of broad public interest. What the media are publicizing is more than the particular historical reconstructions of the figure of Jesus proposed by various scholars. The Jesus Seminar is managing to disseminate a clear position on the questions that concern us. For example, *U.S. News and World Report* carried an article (August 4, 1997) entitled “Bob Funk’s Radical Reformation Roadshow” which quoted Funk, co-chair of the Jesus Seminar, on “the need to set Jesus free . . . from the scriptural and creedal and experiential prisons in which we have incarcerated him.” The outcome, Funk hoped, would be a “radical reformation,” a “reinvention of Christianity” that would replace traditional faith and practice with a faith constructed “on a more rational and historically accurate view of the life and teachings of Jesus.”¹³

Earlier, in the spring of 1996, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report* had carried cover stories chronicling recent research on the histori-

¹² Galvin refers to the definition that John P. Meier offers in the opening chapter of *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus: The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1991), but Meier’s disjunction between “the historical Jesus” and “the real Jesus” and his construal of the latter have evoked stringent criticism from, among others, Tony Kelly, C.S.S.R., “The Historical Jesus and Human Subjectivity: A Response to John Meier,” *Pacifica* 4 (1991) 202–28.

¹³ Jeffrey L. Sheler, “Bob Funk’s Radical Reformation Sideshow: Taking a Controversial Gospel to the People,” *U.S. News and World Report* (August 4, 1997) 55.

cal Jesus. *Time* reported the outcome of the Jesus Seminar's color-coded votes on the historicity of the sayings attributed to Jesus in the New Testament: only 18 percent of these sayings were judged to have been spoken by Jesus. This finding suggested to *Time's* reporter that, "by inference, most Christians' picture of Christ may be radically misguided." The reporter had the grace to introduce a note of hesitancy into that inference ("may be radically misguided"), but the preface to a book published by the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels*,¹⁴ expressed no such reservation. The preface declares that most Christians' Jesus "is an imaginative theological construct, into which have been woven traces of that enigmatic sage from Nazareth—traces that call out for recognition and liberation from the firm grip of those whose faith overpowered their memories." It goes without saying that "the Christ of creed and dogma, who had been firmly in place in the Middle Ages, can no longer command the assent of those who see the heavens through Galileo's eyes."¹⁵

Time's discussion suggests that the Jesus Seminar is disseminating a set of doctrines to a broad public audience. A first doctrine: the advent of modernity ("those who have seen the heavens through Galileo's eyes") renders traditional christological doctrine ("the Christ of creed and dogma") untenable. Second, the scriptural sources of that doctrine ("an imaginative theological construct") distort the memory of Jesus ("faith overpowered their memories"). Third, the real Jesus ("that enigmatic sage from Nazareth") lurks somewhere behind Christian Scripture and teaching, and needs to be liberated from the distorting effects of Christian faith by historical investigations such as those of the Jesus Seminar.

The Jesus Seminar is waging a public campaign with missionary zeal; its strategy is of course a familiar one. Research on the historical Jesus originated as a child of the Enlightenment, and from the outset it has been scholarship with an agenda.¹⁶ Whether the goal be to undermine the Christian Church, as it was for H. S. Reimarus, or to sweep away the accumulated debris of traditional belief and practice in order to concoct a version of Christianity more palatable to modern sensibilities, as it was for Adolf von Harnack, the strategy in either case consists in an appeal to one's reconstruction of the historical Jesus as the real Jesus whom one can then play off against Jesus as the Christian Church confesses and proclaims him. Such is the position being offered diligently for public consumption by the Jesus Seminar, and it has a certain common sense appeal: the real Jesus is

¹⁴ R. W. Funk, R. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels* (New York: Macmillan, 1993).

¹⁵ David Van Biema, "The Gospel Truth?" *Time* (April 8, 1996) 54.

¹⁶ See Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture: Theology and Historical-Critical Method from Spinoza to Käsemann* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

the historical Jesus, and the historical Jesus is the norm for determining what, or even whether, Christianity ought to exist.

A DEBATE REVISITED

In order to gain some purchase on the problems inherent in this position it is instructive to review a discussion that occurred among Catholic theologians as this paradigm shift was well underway.

David Tracy

In a volume entitled *Consensus in Theology?*¹⁷ David Tracy addressed Hans Küng's thesis that "[t]he source, standard, and criterion of Christian faith is the living Jesus of history."¹⁸ Tracy's first point was methodological: historical-critical methods of themselves are necessary but not sufficient for entry into the world of religious meaning disclosed by the New Testament texts, and they need to be complemented by hermeneutical-literary methods as well as methods of ideology-critique. Second, Tracy proposed that the proper function of all such methods in Christian theology is a corrective, not a constitutive one. The locus of the truth constitutive for Christian theology lies elsewhere, Tracy affirmed, "in the personal response of faith in the faith-community as that faith is mediated by the community and the tradition."¹⁹ Failure to acknowledge this point would lead, as it had led Harnack and now, as we have seen, is leading the Jesus Seminar, to "an attempt not merely to correct the tradition but in effect to replace it with historical-critical reconstruction of the message and person of Jesus."²⁰

Tracy offered these points in the form of further questions with which, he recognized, Küng and Schillebeeckx might not necessarily disagree. Certainly Küng's thesis contained an ambiguity. The "living Jesus of history," as "living," might well be taken to refer to Jesus as mediated by the Christian tradition. And if, throughout *On Being A Christian*, Küng seemed simply to equate "the historical Jesus" with the "real Jesus," that apparent identification might well have been dictated by the rhetoric of an apologetic work aimed at the common sense of a broad audience rather than indicating Küng's full position on the technical theological issue. In addition, Tracy granted that "if the critical correlation method is accepted . . .

¹⁷ Hans Küng, Edward Schillebeeckx et al., *Consensus in Theology? A Dialogue with Hans Küng and Edward Schillebeeckx*, ed. Leonard Swidler (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980).

¹⁸ Hans Küng, "Toward a New Consensus in Catholic (and Ecumenical) Theology," *ibid.* 6.

¹⁹ David Tracy, "Particular Questions within General Consensus," *ibid.* 38.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 39.

theologians should attempt some correlation of the results of historico-critical research into the message and person of Jesus (on Küng's model of 'the broad consensus of exegetes') correlated with personal Christian faith in Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ."²¹

In *The Analogical Imagination*²² Tracy had worked out a more complete statement of his own position on the matter. He proposed that "on inner-Christian grounds there is one classic event and person which normatively judges and informs all other Christian classics, and which also serves as the classic Christian focus for understanding God, self, others, society, history, nature, and the whole Christianly: the event and person Jesus Christ."²³ The classic event of Jesus Christ, however, occurs in the present through the mediation of the community founded on the original apostolic witness to that event. The tradition stemming from the apostolic witness constitutes the Church in the present as the community of those who respond in faith to the classic expressions of the event of Jesus Christ in which the actual Jesus, the dangerous memory of whom the tradition keeps alive, is encountered religiously as God's own self-presence. Thus, as Tracy likes to formulate it, "Christians believe *in* Jesus Christ *with* the apostles. . . ."²⁴

Proposing the apostolic witness to Jesus as the Christ as the norm for the subsequent Christian tradition, it follows that, for Tracy, claims that the historical Jesus is the norm or standard for the tradition are confused. He did, however, recognize two functions for the results of research on the historical Jesus. First, "[t]he 'historical Jesus' is *at best* a relatively external and secondary criterion of appropriateness for certain necessary assumptions or presuppositions of that witness to Jesus."²⁵ This point may be taken to specify Galvin's comment, cited above, that "many theological dimensions of issues relative to the Jesus of history remain disputed and obscured." Among such issues Galvin singled out the relation of Jesus' person to his proclamation, Jesus' understanding of his decisive salvific character, the coexistence of present and future dimensions in Jesus' preaching of the kingdom of God, the manner of Jesus' approach to death, and the origin of the Church and sacraments.²⁶ Similarly, among the four values that Avery Dulles assigned to research on the historical Jesus, he

²¹ Ibid. 36.

²² David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

²³ Ibid. 233.

²⁴ Ibid. 237, 329. See also David Tracy, "The Gospels as Revelation and Transformation: A Tribute to Sebastian Moore," in *Jesus Crucified and Risen: Essays in Theology and Spirituality in Honor of Dom Sebastian Moore*, ed. William P. Loewe and Vernon J. Gregson (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1998) 201.

²⁵ Tracy, *Analogical Imagination* 238.

²⁶ Galvin, "From the Humanity of Christ" 260-70.

acknowledged that “by identifying certain elements in the Gospel as historically factual, the historian can on some points *confirm* the faith of believers,” and he offers a list of examples that coincides largely with those of Galvin.²⁷ For Dulles, however, as for Tracy, faith rests on the encounter with God’s revealing word in Christ as mediated through the Church, and so it seems fair to construe the examples that he and Galvin offered as “necessary assumptions or presuppositions” of the apostolic witness.

Tracy recognized a second function for the results of research on the historical Jesus. Theologically interpreted, they can provide a contemporary means “to keep alive and reformulate the ‘dangerous’ and or ‘subversive’ memory of Jesus for the present community in fidelity to the original Jesus-kerygma and Christ-kerygma of the scriptural communities.” And, he observed, “[t]he theological use of the historical Jesus actually *functions* in contemporary Christologies as a continuation of the early apostolic witness and thereby does *in fact* maintain appropriateness to the tradition’s own internal criteria.”²⁸

For Tracy, then, “the real Jesus” is Jesus as the Christ, as God’s decisive self-manifestation, encountered as such in the present through the mediation of the community of his followers and whose dangerous and subversive memory is carried by the tradition of that community. The historical Jesus, however, is a contemporary reconstruction of the earliest memory-image of Jesus carried by the original apostolic witness. Such a reconstruction may serve, on the one hand, to confirm such presuppositions of that witness as the unity of Jesus’ person and message (“implicit Christology”) in early Jesus-kerygma and the other particular issues mentioned by Galvin and Dulles. On the other hand, if such reconstructions are appropriated within the horizon of Christian faith in Jesus as God’s decisive self-disclosure, they can provide material for postcritical narratives continuous with the apostolic witness and that serve to mediate that witness into the present.

Elizabeth Johnson’s Challenge

Elizabeth A. Johnson quickly challenged Tracy’s position, posing two counter-questions to those he had raised to Küng and then elaborating a thesis. Her first question, focusing on the nature of the Gospel tradition, echoed Käsemann’s response to Bultmann. Does not the Gospel tradition itself manifest concern with “the actual history of Jesus of Nazareth, in whom God was believed to have acted?” Since this is so, Johnson averred

²⁷ Avery Dulles, “Historians and the Reality of Christ,” *First Things* 28 (December 1992) 20–25, at 24 (emphasis mine).

²⁸ Tracy, *Analogical Imagination* 239.

that “the New Testament includes the actual Jesus who lived among the criteria of its own validity.” This biblical criterion, in turn, validates “theological interest in historical information about Jesus of Nazareth.”²⁹ Hence not only was Bultmann proved wrong when he relegated the history of Jesus to the prehistory of the kerygma, radically separating “the actual Jesus who lived” from “the confessed, witnessed Christ,”³⁰ but a question also emerges which Johnson addressed to Tracy: “whether the valuable move into hermeneutical concerns does not lead to less than full justice being done to the full nature of the classic Christian texts and the tradition which produced them, and this according to the totality of their own inner criteria.”³¹

Johnson’s second question concerned the referent of the New Testament texts. Bultmann’s existentialist hermeneutic had identified Christian self-understanding as the primary referent of those texts, and Tracy seemed to agree when, especially in his earlier *Blessed Rage for Order*, he highlighted the figure of Jesus as re-presentative of, rather than as having actualized, a way of being in the world.³² Johnson offered two points in response. First, she cited Käsemann’s retort to Herbert Braun’s contention, quoted approvingly by Tracy, that in the New Testament, “the constant is the self-understanding of the believer; christology is the variable.” Käsemann had disagreed, citing a diversity of self-understandings carried by various New Testament texts, a diversity that precluded synthesis into a single understanding of human existence. Second, Johnson continued, not only do the New Testament writings reflect a variety of self-understandings, they also treat many topics related but not reducible to possibilities of human existence. Hence Johnson’s second question to Tracy, namely, “whether the valuable and much-needed concentration on the religious existential significance of christological texts does not lead to less than justice being done to the full nature of the classic Christian texts.”³³

At this point Johnson proposed her thesis: “The reconstructed image of the historical Jesus not only functions today as the equivalent of the memory impression of Jesus in the early Church, but actually is the equivalent of it, i.e., is the means by which significant segments of the present generation of believers remember Jesus who is confessed as the Christ. As such, it is an element of the living tradition of the present Church.”³⁴ For

²⁹ Elizabeth A. Johnson, “The Theological Relevance of the Historical Jesus: A Debate and a Thesis,” *The Thomist* 48 (1984) 1–43, at 19.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 18.

³¹ *Ibid.* 21.

³² D. Tracy, *Blessed Rage For Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1975) 214–23.

³³ Johnson, “Theological Relevance” 24.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 25.

Johnson the historical Jesus is theologically relevant because it is Jesus whom the Church confesses as the Christ. From the outset the Church's memory-image of Jesus has served as the symbol mediating the mystery of God's decisive self-gift to humankind. Originating with Jesus' first disciples' direct experience of his ministry and death, remembered in light of his Resurrection, that memory-image has developed dynamically through the course of centuries in response to new cultural contexts and exigencies. At present, Johnson urged, the Church's memory-image of Jesus is again undergoing a transformation as it absorbs the results of contemporary research on the historical Jesus.

As a first theological function, then, Johnson noted that reliable historical knowledge of Jesus' earthly history is in fact entering materially into believers' faith-image of Jesus. Second, she proposed that this historical knowledge acquires a critical theological function when it is employed to purify the Church's faith-image of Jesus from ideological manipulation or projection. Third, the results of research on the historical Jesus concretize Jesus' humanity, countering the recurrent temptation to docetism that afflicts the Christian tradition. In addition, as liberation and feminist theologians are discovering, recourse to the results of research on the historical Jesus also promotes a grasp of the full dimensions of salvation against all spiritualizing and privatizing tendencies. Such recourse places a healthy emphasis on discipleship, rather than mere church membership, as the key to authentic Christian identity.

Points of Agreement

Tracy and Johnson agreed on one crucial point that Johnson expressed when she stated flatly that "[t]he image of the historical Jesus, formed by the coalescence of historical knowledge about him, is not properly utilized if it becomes a verification or a proof of faith." For Johnson, as for Tracy, "it is a misuse of the historical Jesus to employ it to ground in whole or part the kerygma."³⁵

Beyond this point of fundamental agreement, it is not clear that Tracy disallowed the theological functions Johnson sought to vindicate for the results of research on the historical Jesus; indeed, the opposite is the case. If, for instance, Johnson's thesis asserted that the reconstructed image of the historical Jesus had assumed a theological role at present as an element in the living tradition of the Church, Tracy had already recognized that historical reconstructions, theologically interpreted, have indeed come to function of late as continuations of the early apostolic witness. In addition, if Johnson claimed a critical role for the historical image of Jesus in coun-

³⁵ Ibid. 32, 42.

tering ideological distortions of the tradition, this role would have seemed to be precisely what Tracy had in mind when he characterized the memory of Jesus which the results of research on the historical Jesus can serve to keep alive for the present community as “dangerous and subversive.” Rather than disallowing them, Tracy offered an explicit account of the functions Johnson articulates.

The Point at Issue

What, then, of the debate to which Johnson challenged Tracy? Has it simply dissolved into harmony? Underlying the various particular issues we have discussed, one fundamental point of difference still remains. In the course of laying out Tracy’s position, Johnson noted that in his response to the Christologies of Küng, Sobrino, Schillebeeckx, and others—the authors whom Galvin adduced as instantiating the paradigm shift that doubtlessly characterizes recent Christologies—Tracy asserted that their claims to be “grounding” Christology, as Hellwig would have it, in the historical Jesus amount to “nothing less than a choice of the wrong religious classic to interpret when interpreting Christianity as a religion.” Taken as a whole, Johnson’s article can be read as a challenge to precisely this judgment. The thrust of her arguments for the theological appropriateness of the recent christological focus on the historical Jesus amounts, in the end, to a claim that the historical Jesus has in fact, and rightly, achieved classic status in contemporary Christology.

LIMITS OF A PARADIGM SHIFT

Pursuit of this issue promises to yield clarity on the two further questions that emerged from Galvin’s discussion of the recent paradigm shift in Christology, namely, the question of the theological relevance of the project and results of research on the historical Jesus and the related question of what, precisely, is meant by “the historical Jesus.” The limits of that paradigm shift will also come to light.

Collapse of a Consensus

At least in one respect, events have overtaken the Tracy-Johnson debate. In his response to Küng’s thesis Tracy had alluded to “the broad consensus of exegetes” regarding historical-critical analysis of Jesus’ message and person,³⁶ and Johnson, defining the historical Jesus as “that image of Jesus of Nazareth reconstructed by way of inference from our present sources with the tools of historical criticism,” was able to appeal to “a

³⁶ Tracy, “Particular Questions” 36.

growing consensus among interpreters of the New Testament . . . about what can be known in an historically trustworthy fashion of Jesus of Nazareth.”³⁷ That “core of information,” though variously appropriated in Christologies such as those of Küng, Schillebeeckx, and Kasper, allowed Johnson to observe that “each theologian is utilizing basically the same elements which comprise the image of the historical Jesus reconstructed from Christian texts.”³⁸ Johnson listed a catalogue of such elements, and Tracy provided a similar inventory of historically ascertained facts about Jesus of Nazareth.³⁹ Given that solid consensus, Tracy’s judgment that the historical Jesus was the wrong classic because, among other reasons as Johnson paraphrased him, it was “too fragile a base from which to make the Christian interpretation,”⁴⁰ was somewhat lacking in plausibility.

The Tracy-Johnson debate took place when the “new quest” for the historical Jesus had been underway for some three decades. It had in fact achieved the broad consensus synthesized by the then nonagenarian Swedish bishop and theologian Gustaf Aulén in his *Jesus in Contemporary Historical Research*.⁴¹ The year after Johnson’s article appeared, however, two significant events occurred in regard to research on the historical Jesus. In 1985, E. P. Sanders published *Jesus and Judaism*,⁴² a work that proved the sort of watershed for the “new quest” that Albert Schweitzer had provided for the “old quest” in 1906 with his *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*.⁴³ Sanders exposed the extent to which Lutheran theological presuppositions had informed the work of the post-Bultmannians among whom the “new quest” had originated, leading them to project Luther’s Law-Gospel dialectic onto Jesus and the Judaism of his day. Recognition of that distortion, as well as refined appreciation of the broad pluralism that characterized Second Temple Judaism, have since led many researchers to correct the “new quest” with an endeavor to recover the Jewishness of Jesus.⁴⁴

³⁷ Johnson, “Theological Relevance” 5, 7.

³⁸ Ibid. 8, 9.

³⁹ Tracy, *Analogical Imagination* 300 n.97.

⁴⁰ Johnson, “Theological Relevance” 14. Bernard Lonergan earlier made the same point as Tracy when he wrote, “Now what is open to radical change, is the incipient and still tentative reconstruction of the thought and language of the Jesus of history” (“Christology Today: Methodological Reflections,” in *A Third Collection: Papers by Bernard J. F. Lonergan, S.J.*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe [New York: Paulist, 1985] 86).

⁴¹ Gustaf Aulén, *Jesus in Contemporary Historical Research*, trans. I. Hjelm (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976).

⁴² E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

⁴³ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. W. Montgomery (New York: Macmillan, 1961; original edition 1906).

⁴⁴ *Jesus’ Jewishness*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

The same year, 1985, also saw the organization of the Jesus Seminar under the leadership of Robert Funk and John Dominic Crossan. Beyond its notorious practice of deciding the historicity of Jesus' deeds and sayings by casting color-coded beads, the Jesus Seminar has argued for the priority of the Gospel of Thomas over the Synoptics and promoted the hypothetical Sayings Source (Q) to the status of a full-blown Gospel with its own community and multistage redactional history. In addition to this controversial revision of sources, the Jesus Seminar has also given research on the historical Jesus an interdisciplinary turn, drawing the conventional use of form-critical criteria into dialogue with the sociology and cultural anthropology of the first-century Roman Empire. The effect has been to plunge research on the historical Jesus into a full-scale debate regarding fundamental issues of sources and methodology. At the same time, individual scholars have been producing a broad array of quite diverse historical portraits of Jesus.

These developments have led commentators to identify 1985 as a turning point in research on the historical Jesus equal in significance to 1953, the year in which Käsemann launched the "new quest" with his lecture on "The Problem of the Historical Jesus."⁴⁵ It has now become conventional to refer to a "third quest" for the historical Jesus.⁴⁶ At present, then, the consensus to which Johnson was able to appeal, and that Tracy likewise acknowledged, has disappeared. Hence Johnson's confident reference to "the image of the historical Jesus" (emphasis added) has become problematic, and Tracy's caution about the fragility of the historical Jesus as the wrong classic upon which to construct Christologies deserves a more serious hearing.

"The Historical Jesus"

Even apart from the emergence of the "third quest," a closer examination of Johnson's construal of "the historical Jesus" can advance our pursuit of the fundamental questions that arise with the paradigm shift in recent Christology. At the outset of her article Johnson carefully distinguished "the historical Jesus" from three other referents. First, because of the selective character of early Christian memories, because of the confessional nature of the Gospels as sources, and because the "secret" of any

⁴⁵ Käsemann's lecture can be found in his *Essays on New Testament Themes*, trans. W. Montague (Naperville, Ill.: Alec R. Allenson, 1964) 15–47.

⁴⁶ For surveys, see Marcus Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Trinity, 1994); Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Quest for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995); Mark Allan Powell, *Jesus as a Figure in History: How Modern Historians View the Man from Galilee* (Louisville: Westminster/Knox, 1998).

individual eludes purely scientific inquiry, “the historical Jesus” cannot be equated with Jesus “as he really was,” the actual Jesus. Nor, secondly, is “the historical Jesus” to be identified with the memory impressions retained by the earliest Christian communities. While highly dependent on these as a source of data, “the historical Jesus” is based on the entire New Testament tradition and thus can claim greater comprehensiveness than any particular memory impression carried by that tradition. Lastly, “the historical Jesus” differs from the biblical portraits of Christ, which are clearly informed by the results of ongoing theological reflection and deeper insight into Jesus’ significance. For Johnson, “‘the historical Jesus’ . . . refers to that image of Jesus of Nazareth reconstructed by way of inference from our present sources with the tools of historical criticism.”⁴⁷

The distinctions Johnson drew are valid and important, and she was also correct when she claimed a positive relationship between “the historical Jesus” and “the actual Jesus who lived.” The results of historical critical reconstruction can approximate the latter, “however asymptotically,” so that there can be “a true but incomplete coherence between the two.”⁴⁸ Historical reconstruction has inherent limits, but those limits do not justify sheer historical skepticism.

Greater clarity may be achieved, however, by further differentiating Johnson’s definition of “the historical Jesus.” For Johnson “the historical Jesus” is an image comprised of a “core of information,” a set of reliable facts about Jesus and emerging from their “coalescence.”⁴⁹ While the question of the historical Jesus is a modern phenomenon, it is also unavoidable: “With historical understanding a given in the western world, most contemporary believers cannot avoid the historical question of whether something happened and, in fact, of *what* happened.”⁵⁰ As for the results of research on the historical Jesus, Johnson contended that they constitute “the present form of the Church’s knowledge of Jesus in his past actuality,” so that “the historical Jesus is intrinsically related to Christian faith.”⁵¹

Granting the inevitability of the question of the historical Jesus in a historically conscious culture, I would nonetheless suggest that a closer examination of Johnson’s definition will demonstrate why Johnson’s claim for the significance of “the historical Jesus” as the present form of the Church’s knowledge of Jesus in his past actuality is problematic and why, as Tracy has it, “the historical Jesus” is the wrong classic for Christology to base itself upon, though it may be integrated into Christology in the ways upon which Tracy and Johnson are in accord. According to Johnson, “the

⁴⁷ Johnson, “Theological Relevance” 5.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 6.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 33.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 5, 35.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 32.

historical Jesus” is an image arising from the coalescence of a set of reliable historical facts. Implicit in this definition are at least three distinct historical operations. First, there is a question of determining which data are relevant as possible sources of historical information about Jesus. Answering that question involves such tasks as determining dates for the possibly relevant sources, ascertaining the literary relationships among them, and delving into their prehistory. Conventionally, these have been the tasks that define source and form critical analysis of the New Testament and related documents. Secondly, there is the task of extricating from these sources a set of facts about Jesus—what he actually said or did. Ordinarily this task has been pursued through the application of such form-critical criteria as the principles of embarrassment, dissimilarity, multiple attestation, and coherence,⁵² though these criteria have themselves been subject to critique and reformulation.⁵³ Thirdly, once a set of such facts has been determined, they become data for the further question of what they add up to, the question of what image renders them historically intelligible within the world of the first century.⁵⁴ While this question is logically distinct from the second, in fact there is normally an interplay between image and facts. One commonly begins with some image, or several, and then employs it or them as a heuristic or initial hypothesis guiding one’s critical probe of the sources for determining the facts about Jesus and to be confirmed, revised, or replaced as that probe proceeds.

“The historical Jesus” thus refers to a complex construct that rests on a set of more or less probable judgments about which sources are relevant and to what degree. Following upon those judgments there follows another set, each one again of greater or lesser probability, determining what Jesus

⁵² For an account of these criteria and an evaluation of others, see John P. Meier, “Criteria: How Do We Decide What Comes From Jesus?” in *A Marginal Jew* 1.167–95.

⁵³ See, for example, Morna Hooker’s critique of the principle of dissimilarity, “On Using the Wrong Tool,” *Theology* 75 (1972) 570–81, and N. T. Wright’s challenge to “the constraining shackles of form- and tradition-criticism” and his commendation of those works in which “[t]he much vaunted ‘normal critical tools’, particularly form-criticism, are being tacitly (and in my view rightly) bypassed in the search for Jesus” and in which “enquiry is proceeding by means of a proper, and often clearly articulated, method of hypothesis and verification” (N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996] 24, 87).

⁵⁴ Luke Timothy Johnson challenges the enterprise of research on the historical Jesus; once the facts of Jesus’ deeds and words have been removed from the order provided by the evangelists, he deems it arbitrary, given their fragmentary and incomplete character, to seek their intelligibility in another context (“The Limitations of History,” in *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* [San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996] 81–104).

actually said and did. Those judgments in turn supply the data for yet another judgment concerning which image or images best render the facts constituted by the second set of judgments historically intelligible. As a construct, “the historical Jesus” is indeed fragile and tenuous, related at best “asymptotically,” as Johnson has it, to the historical reality of Jesus’ actual life and death. “The historical Jesus” is always someone’s “historical Jesus,” and always in principle subject to revision. Growing historical knowledge of Second Temple Judaism and the Roman Empire in the first century, for example, may have the effect of altering, expanding, or even contracting one’s estimate of the sources immediately or proximately relevant to research on the historical Jesus. Such an expansion of knowledge of Jesus’ historical context may also expand the pool of images available first as heuristic guides for determining Jesus’ historical words and deeds and finally as expressions of the historical intelligibility of those words and deeds, while it may also render some of those images inappropriate or implausible. Finally, both increased knowledge of the historical context and debate regarding the method and criteria by which one moves from historical data to judgments of historical fact about Jesus may effect significant revisions in one’s judgment of the probability of the latter both individually or as a set.

CONCLUSION

If this account achieves some measure of adequacy in explicating what is meant by “the historical Jesus,” what implications does it carry for theologians? For one, the maneuver common to the “old quest” and to the Jesus Seminar’s campaign is invalid, for two reasons. On the one hand, as a matter of fact, the historical reconstructions offered by Reimarus and Harnack as identical with “the real Jesus” have themselves fallen victim to the progress of research on the historical Jesus, while the various reconstructions proffered by members of the Jesus Seminar differ significantly among themselves and remain methodologically problematic. Hence the claim, common to both the “old quest” and the Jesus Seminar, that “the historical Jesus” is simply to be identified with “the real Jesus” is naïve.

On the other hand, as both Tracy and Johnson recognized, “the historical Jesus” is not the basis of Christian faith. Faith, as Tracy argued, is response to Jesus encountered through the mediation of community and tradition as God’s self-communication in the present, and what norms the tradition is the apostolic witness to Jesus in his religious significance as the Christ. Hence, given both the nature of historical-Jesus constructs and the nature of Christian faith, appeals such as those of the Jesus Seminar to “the historical Jesus” as the real Jesus that should norm Christian faith are misguided. “The historical Jesus” constitutes neither the ground nor basis

for Christian faith, nor is it the norm for faith. Certainly no historical reconstruction can prove the appropriateness of Christian response to Jesus as God's self-presence, although, as Tracy, Galvin, and Dulles concur, the results of research on the historical Jesus can serve to clarify and perhaps confirm certain presuppositions of the confession of Jesus as the Christ.

Yet "the historical Jesus" and the real Jesus are not simply disparate. There is only one Jesus, at once confessed by Christians as God's self-presence and also, in his earthly career as a first-century Jew, a legitimate object of historical-critical inquiry. "The historical Jesus" and "the Christ of faith" differ as epistemological categories, not substantively, and this state of affairs grounds the positive theological functions that both Tracy and Johnson assign "the historical Jesus." When historical-Jesus constructs are drawn into the horizon of faith and illumined by the light of faith, the coherence of these historical images and narratives with the transformative values appropriated in the tradition's confession of Jesus as the Christ may be grasped. Thus endowed with religious significance, in a fashion analogous to the original formation of the christological tradition, these historical images and narratives may provide the material for new christological symbols and post-critical narratives disclosive of both Jesus' status as God's self-presence in the present and of the values inherent in the faith response to this Jesus the Christ.⁵⁵ In this manner "the historical Jesus" may enter into the christological process and serve to advance it.

At present, however, "the historical Jesus" is an abstraction. Concretely, research on the historical Jesus currently offers a wide array of historical images of Jesus: the wonder-working charismatic *hasid*, the eschatological prophet, the Jewish sage, the hippie-like wandering peasant Cynic, one

⁵⁵ This distinction between "the historical Jesus" as a historian's artifact and as religiously appropriated allows Tracy to state that his "belief in the disclosive theological power of contemporary christologies that claim they are grounded in 'the historical Jesus' . . . is that even though that claim does *not* hold . . . these christologies remain remarkably disclosive theological interpretations of the Jesus-kerygma now experienced as dangerous and subversive in a particular tradition and retrieved for a particular situation That these theologians make the dangerous memory of Jesus live anew as a disclosive-transformative word and manifestation of Jesus Christ *now* is what makes their works new and important christologies—not their theological claims about 'the historical Jesus' "(*Analogical Imagination* 334 n. 15). If Tracy found the reformulation of "the historical Jesus" as the "dangerous and subversive memory of Jesus" confusing in the works of such liberation theologians as Leonardo Boff and Jon Sobrino (ibid. 345 n. 24), the confusion stems from a failure to observe the epistemological distinction noted here, a failure that evoked a scathing critique from John P. Meier in "Jesus Among the Theologians. II. Sobrino and Segundo," in *The Mission of Christ and His Church: Studies in Christology and Ecclesiology* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1990) 49–69.

who combines and exceeds the roles of Elijah-like prophet, teacher of Torah, and wonder-worker, etc.⁵⁶ Each of these images, in turn, represents highly contested judgments on sources and method.

While some of these images may be more compatible with Christian faith than others, their pluralism challenges the responsible theologian who would appropriate “the historical Jesus” christologically to enter this conflict of interpretations and arrive at a judgment about which represents the best available historical opinion. While faith may perceive the greater or lesser coherence of some historical image or images with its religious confession of Jesus as the Christ, faith cannot settle the historical issue of which image or images best capture the historical intelligibility of Jesus in the context of his earthly life. This is a historical judgment that involves the theologian in weighing the probabilities of the various positions regarding sources, method, and facts ingredient to every historical reconstruction. Given the ongoing character of the project of research on the historical Jesus and its presently highly conflictual nature, this decision about the best available historical opinion will be made modestly, and that modesty posts a limit to the current paradigm shift in Christology.

That a paradigm shift has occurred is undeniable. Characterizing it as a shift from “the humanity of Christ” (a metaphysical category) to “the historical Jesus” (a historical category) succeeds in highlighting the nature of the shift. But acknowledging the limited theological relevance of “the historical Jesus”—it is not the ground of either Christian faith or, consequently, of Christology—yields a more precise understanding of the paradigm shift that has occurred in the past three decades. With this shift, Christology has moved from an ahistorical, metaphysical approach to questions generated by and answered within the framework of the dogma of Chalcedon to a historical, genetic, and dialectical account of the entire christological tradition in the service of a constructive statement of its contemporary significance. Within that genetic account the question of the historical Jesus, a determination of its theological significance, and some account of the current results of research on the historical Jesus have a legitimate place, but “the historical Jesus” is neither the foundation of Christology nor its primary norm.

⁵⁶ Respectively, Geza Vermès, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*; Ben Witherington III, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984); John D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991); John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus 2: Mentor, Message and Miracles* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1994).