

## Intersections

---

Volume 1998 | Number 5

Article 8

---

1998

# The Quest of the Historical Jesus: Problem & Promise

Robert W. Funk

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/intersections>

---

### Augustana Digital Commons Citation

Funk, Robert W. (1998) "The Quest of the Historical Jesus: Problem & Promise," *Intersections*: Vol. 1998: No. 5, Article 8.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/intersections/vol1998/iss5/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Intersections by an authorized administrator of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@augustana.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@augustana.edu).

## DISCUSSION:

# THE QUEST OF THE HISTORICAL JESUS: PROBLEM & PROMISE

*Robert W. Funk*

### Introduction

The quest of the historical Jesus is the pursuit of the discrepancy between the historical figure and the portraits of him in the gospels. The problem is to distinguish fact from fiction in the twenty-two ancient gospels that contain reports about what he said and did. The quest is thus essentially a search for reliable data.

The popular view is that Jesus did and said everything that is reported of him in the four New Testament gospels. After more than two centuries of critical work we know that is not true: the New Testament gospels are a mixture of folk memories and creative storytelling; there is very little hard history. Furthermore, we now have the text, in whole or in part, of eighteen additional gospels to consider. Like the New Testament gospels, they too must be evaluated critically. The first task of the quest is to establish a firm database from which to reconstruct aspects of the historical figure of Jesus.

Many scholars believe we can isolate at least a small fund of reliable historical data. Of what value are those data? Does knowledge of the historical Jesus carry any significance for Christian faith?

Responses to this question fall into two discrete categories, which I will refer to as "parties." On the one hand, the Apostolic Party insists that knowledge of the historical Jesus does not and cannot affect how we understand the Christian faith. The content of the faith was once and for all determined by the "apostles" and early church councils. On the other hand, the Jesus Party believes knowledge of the historical Jesus does matter and that Jesus should have something to say about the religion that claims him as lord.

The difference between these two parties may be expressed in these two formulations:

---

Robert W. Funk is the founder of The Jesus Seminar and Weststar Institute. Recent books include *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millenium* (Harper 1996) and *Five Gospels: What Did Jesus really say?* (Harper 1996)

---

(1) *Jesus reveals God as the absolute monarch of the kingdom of God.*

(2) *In his confession, "You are the Anointed" (the messiah),<sup>1</sup> Simon Peter reveals who Jesus is.*

The Apostolic Party vests its faith in the faith of the apostle Peter, as expressed in his confession. The Jesus Party believes that Jesus, and not Peter, ought to have the primary say about the faith that posits him as its author.

There is also a third party, the Bible Party, that cannot always be distinguished from the Apostolic Party: the Bible Party is willing to risk everything on the New Testament, with or without the confirmation of the creeds. The New Testament reveals the convictions of a select group of early believers headed by the apostle Paul.

The three parties represent three options: The Jesus Party makes Jesus the catalyst of the faith; the Apostolic Party bases its claims on the confession of Peter and the creeds; and the Bible Party takes the New Testament as the foundation of its faith.

For those who have taken the decisions of the ancient ecumenical councils as normative, the insertion of the historical Jesus into the equation has a destabilizing effect: Jesus may not support the vote of the councils. For those who have vested everything in the reliability of the New Testament gospels, the foundations have already been shaken as a consequence of two centuries of critical scholarship. But for others, especially for those for whom the ancient creedal formulations have begun to lose their cogency, any success in rediscovering the founder of the faith is filled with promise regardless of its consequences.

For the most part during its long history, Christianity has been preoccupied with the status of Jesus rather than with the kingdom of God, which was the focus of Jesus' teaching. Christians call on converts to confess that Jesus is lord and personal savior. Christian leaders tend to follow that with demands to support and honor the church and accept the teachings of its leaders. As a result of the quest, however, we are being challenged to ask ourselves whether those requirements square with Jesus focus on the kingdom of

God.

The discrepancy between Jesus' views and behavior and the institutional church is joined by a second entirely modern problem. In his famous demythologizing essay of 1941, Rudolf Bultmann pointed out that the ancient cosmology that frames the Christian message is no longer functional. We no longer believe in a three-tiered universe, heaven and hell, a second coming, a final holocaust, and life after death. These features do not fit our knowledge of the physical universe. They should have awakened us long ago to the possibility that such elements may not be an adequate vehicle of the Christian message. That possibility is reinforced as it becomes clearer that these items were not part of the message of Jesus. We may be clinging to the old worldview in order to retain our theological and ecclesiastical brokerage systems.

My basic propositions, then, are these:

[1] *The quest of the historical Jesus is the pursuit of the discrepancy between the historical figure and the representations of him in the gospels.*

[2] *The quest of the historical Jesus is the search for reliable data.*

[3] *The quest of the historical Jesus assumes that some reliable historical data are recoverable.*

[4] *Knowledge of the historical Jesus matters for faith.*

[5] *The recovery of the historical figure of Jesus may precipitate a sweeping reformation of the Christian tradition as it enters the third millennium.*

● [1] **The quest of the historical Jesus is the pursuit of the discrepancy between the historical figure and the representations of him in the gospels.**

The quest assumes there is some discrepancy between the historical figure of Jesus and the way he is depicted in all the surviving gospels. Were there no discrepancy, there would be no need, indeed, no incentive, for a quest. The quest implies that what Jesus said and did has been fictionalized, misrepresented, or distorted to some extent in these ancient texts. Critical scholars---those whose historical judgments are not driven by theological commitments---generally subscribe to this point.

How do scholars know there is a discrepancy? The principal reason is that the gospels themselves vary in the pictures they present of the historical figure. That, in turn, leads scholars to suspect that the gospels were not written by eyewitnesses. These two issues are worth close scrutiny.

### 1. The synoptics vs. John.

In the modern critical study of the gospels beginning as early as the eighteenth century, it became apparent that the Gospel of John presents a very different picture of Jesus than do the so-called synoptic gospels---Mark, Matthew, Luke. In John, for example, Jesus speaks in long, involved discourses, while in the synoptics Jesus' discourse consists by and large of short stories we call parables and one- and two-liners that look like proverbs or epigrams. In the synoptics, the subject of Jesus' teaching is the kingdom of God or God's domain; in John, Jesus makes himself the theme of his own teaching. In the synoptics, Jesus' concerns appear to turn outward on the poor, oppressed, sinners, and defiled; in John, his vision is focused on his own status and the status of those who belong to his community. It is often difficult to believe that the synoptics and John are actually depicting the same person.

As a consequence of these and other discrepancies, it became almost axiomatic in the last two centuries of critical study to hold the view that any real history of Jesus of Nazareth is to be found primarily in the synoptics rather than in John.

### 2. Matthew and Luke rewrite Mark

Most scholars believe that Matthew and Luke based their gospels on the gospel of Mark. If Matthew and Luke are doing no more than copying (and revising) Mark, do they provide us with independent information about Jesus? Again, the common judgment is that Matthew and Luke add little or nothing reliable to Mark when they are revising their source. However, Matthew and Luke may have made us of independent traditions---stories and sayings---where they depart from Mark. These "stray" traditions may contain important information about Jesus.

### 3. Mark and Q.

As biblical scholarship emerged from under the censorious eye of dogmatic theology during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it became clear that even the synoptic evangelists differed considerably from each other in the way they represented Jesus. And then with the emergence of the Q hypothesis---a sayings gospel common to Matthew and Luke---and the discovery of the Gospel of Thomas in 1945, the contrasting images of Jesus multiplied still further. The Gospel of Mark represents Jesus as preparing for his death almost from the beginning of his public life. Jesus three times predicts his own death. At one point Jesus even interprets his own impending death as "a ransom for many."<sup>2</sup>

The Sayings Gospel Q, on the other hand, has no passion narrative, no predictions of death, no resurrection stories, no birth and childhood stories. In Q Jesus is primarily a teacher

of wisdom, although he does occasionally cure people. The orthodox interpretation of Jesus' death and resurrection had apparently not yet taken root in the formulation of gospels. Whether or not an early gospel like Q could have existed continued to be debated until the discovery of the Gospel of Thomas in 1945. Thomas contains 114 sayings attributed to Jesus; it has no narrative framework, no passion story, no resurrection stories, no birth and childhood tales. It is now certain that sayings gospels once existed, but were in fact suppressed by the orthodox tradition once it had taken root and come to dominate the councils of the ancient church. Three very different pictures of Jesus thus emerge from the ancient gospels: the one propounded by the Fourth Gospel, the portrait offered the synoptics, and the itinerant sage that appears in the earliest of these, the sayings gospels.

#### 4. Enlistment of the first disciples: fact or fiction?

Those who read the gospels without the benefit of critical knowledge often assume that the gospels are made up of reports of eyewitnesses. Those eyewitnesses are presumed to be the principal figures who are mentioned in the gospels as early companions of Jesus---Peter and Andrew, James and John, to mention only four. What then about the stories that tell how these first followers came to be disciples? Are they the reports of actual events?

In the first chapter of Mark,<sup>3</sup> the evangelist records two stories in which first Peter and Andrew and then James and John are enlisted as followers of Jesus. In each case the pair is fishing on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus comes along and calls out, "Become my followers and I'll have you fishing for people." They abandon their nets right then and there and become his disciples.

The two stories in Mark are carbon copies of each other. The motivation for the fishermen to abandon their livelihood and follow Jesus is not given. All Jesus has to do is challenge and they respond. Jesus speaks with authority. His presence is electric.

Folklorists describe such scenes as idealized or stereotypical. In them, Jesus is a figure who commands and whom all obey; that figure is a retrojection into their original encounter with him from the standpoint of the faith later followers acquired. Put differently, the scenes in Mark, repeated almost word-for-word in Matthew, are not real scenes but the product of an imagination informed by the subsequent course of events.

When Luke comes to this point in the copy of Mark he has before him, he doesn't like what he reads, so he tells a

different story. In Luke's version,<sup>4</sup> Jesus borrows one of the fishing boats, pulls out from the shore, and teaches the crowd on shore from the boat. When Jesus has finished teaching, he asks Simon Peter to pull out into the deep water and lower the nets for a catch. Simon protests: "We've been at it all night and haven't caught a thing." But he follows instructions. The result is a catch so huge Peter must summon other boats to help with the haul.

In Luke's account, James and John are now partners of Peter rather than a second, independent pair; Andrew is not mentioned. Luke has reduced two stories to one. In Luke's version, Jesus tells them the same thing as he does in Mark's account: "Follow me and I'll have you fishing for people." And, as in Mark's account, they abandon everything and become disciples. There can be no doubt that these stories refer to the same event.

As Luke rewrites Mark, he borrows a theme from another story, probably an appearance story, and rewrites the call story so that there is proper motivation for the trio to act as they do. In other words, Luke is a better storyteller than Mark (and Matthew).

There is a third version of this same set of events in the Gospel of John.<sup>5</sup> In John's version, Jesus is still in the Jordan Valley where John is baptizing (in the synoptics, Jesus has left John and returned to Galilee). Andrew and an unnamed disciple hear John the Baptist refer to Jesus as the lamb of God and begin to follow him. The next day Andrew finds Peter, his brother, and brings him to Jesus, who immediately changes his name to "Rock."

The day following Jesus finds Philip, who is also from Bethsaida, the hometown of Peter and Andrew. He says follow me and Philip does. Philip enlists his brother Nathanael who also becomes a follower. They then leave for Galilee.

The very least that can be said about these three versions of the call of the first disciples is that the gospel storytellers remember the inaugural contact with Jesus very differently. Different pairs or groups are involved, and in the Johannine version the location is different. In the earliest version, Mark, no motivation is supplied; in Luke and John motivation is supplied. Yet the words Jesus speaks are almost identical and the response is immediate and absolute.

The principals involved either did not remember clearly how they came to be involved in the Jesus movement, or the stories they may originally have told were repeated and

elaborated so frequently that they developed along rather different lines. In the process the tales became more and more idealized or abstract and for the modern historian less and less believable as reports of specific events. They became legends rather than eyewitness reports of particular events.

● **The quest of the historical Jesus is the search for reliable data.**

In his huge ongoing work, *A Marginal Jew*, already running to two lengthy volumes, John P. Meier, a Jesuit who teaches at Catholic University, states that the quest is a search for reliable data. In this he is doing no more than asserting the view to which all questers for the historical figure of Jesus subscribe.

If the quest is a search for reliable data, that should be our first goal: to agree on a database of reliable data. That was the goal the Jesus Seminar adopted for itself when it began its work in 1985. In the interim, the Seminar has sorted through all the words ascribed to Jesus in all the sources surviving from the first three centuries of the common era. It has identified those words that, in the judgment of the Fellows of the Seminar, were most probably spoken by Jesus. When we had completed that task, we turned to all the reports in all the gospels of what Jesus did and carried out a similar evaluation. The result was the creation of a twin database: The first was published as *The Five Gospels*, the second as *The Acts of Jesus*, which has just now appeared.

It was not until we had finished the first two phases of our work that we permitted ourselves to interpret that database. Our interpretations took the form of profiles of Jesus prepared by individual Fellows. Profiles of Jesus comprise the third phase of the Seminar, a phase that is just now drawing to a close.

In our assessment of the data, we developed criteria---rules of evidence---to serve as guidelines. Those criteria were accompanied by a history of individual stories in most cases as a part of the evaluation. In *The Five Gospels* and *The Acts of Jesus*, we color-coded the results of our deliberations and endeavored to give a brief account of how we reached our conclusions.

Our intention in creating a color-coded report was to make its contents immediately evident to the general reader without the necessity of reading hundreds of pages of

commentary. In addition, it took as its model the red-letter editions of the New Testament widely known among readers of the Bible. To our great surprise, *The Five Gospels* made it onto the religion best-seller list for nine months.

The task of establishing a compendium of reliable data seemed to me to require a wide spectrum of collaboration on fully ecumenical terms. The make-up of the Seminar appeared to guarantee both. Hundreds of scholars were invited over the years to participate. Nearly two hundred have contributed to one degree or another. More than seventy-five scholars have signed the two reports. To sustain that kind of effort over a thirteen-year span is no mean achievement.

Yet the response we have elicited from some colleagues who did not participate has been nothing short of uncivil. We have been the object of rancor, vituperation, name calling, and scathing satire. Rather than enter into critical dialogue about the emerging database, scholars have felt it appropriate to attack members of the Seminar personally. In many cases, these responses have violated the canons of professional behavior.

There are three reasons, in my estimation, we have gotten the kind of response we have. First, we caught our colleagues by surprise in exposing widely held academic views to public scrutiny, perhaps for the first time in this century. The fact that parish minister and priest have withheld this common information from their parishioners contributed to the surprise. The revelation of a closely guarded secret deepened the chagrin felt by many colleagues. An angry rebuttal is often the defense needed to buy time for thought.

Secondly, *The Five Gospels* intervened directly in the way scripture is read and interpreted. The quest began to destabilize the canon---the authority of the New Testament gospels---and to introduce strange new documents into the discussion.

Thirdly, the gradual demise of neo-orthodoxy, the theological consensus in the previous period, produced pangs of trauma. I make this third suggestion out of experience: many of us in the Seminar have gone through one painful transition after another as we struggled toward a new consensus. At some point in the life of the Seminar, perhaps only after eight or nine years of extended debate, the Fellows began to act as though honesty, confession, and candor were the proper mode of behavior; posturing receded and then largely disappeared.

● [2] **The quest of the historical Jesus assumes that some reliable data are recoverable.**

Those who take the quest seriously believe that we can actually succeed, at least in some particulars, in distinguishing the historical figure from the gospel representations of him. But we do not think that our reconstruction will stand up for all time, that we have finally and absolutely recovered that historical person. On the contrary. Just as we have attempted to identify and correct the mistakes our mentors made in their quest, others will follow us to fix the mistakes we have made. Nevertheless, we believe enough in the integrity of our work to think that we have caught sight of the historical figure now and again in the pages of the ancient gospels.

Our confidence rests on the axioms we share with many if not most critical scholars. First, the synoptic Jesus is closer to the historical figure than the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel. Second, Mark is the first narrative gospel to be composed and serves as the narrative framework for both Matthew and Luke. Third, we believe the Sayings Gospel Q was an early written source of which Matthew and Luke made use. Fourth, we think the Jesus of Q and the Gospel of Thomas is closer to the historical figure than the Jesus of the synoptics. On the basis of the sayings gospels, it appears that two characteristic speech forms of Jesus were parables and witticisms we call aphorisms. They serve as the basis for a voice print with respect to both style and content. The isolation of an authentic body of Jesus lore then served as the basis for identifying things he may have done.

In tandem with this series of steps, we reviewed and revised the history of the gospel traditions.

We agreed, again with most critical scholars, that the birth and childhood stories were developed very late in the tradition and contain very little by way of historical reminiscence.

After a review of the scholarly literature and extended analysis of the texts, we agreed that the resurrection was a private event open only to select believers, that the reports were a compendium of different stories, that none of the inner circle of male disciples saw the angel at the tomb, only the women. Further, we agreed that Paul was the only one who claims to have seen the risen Lord who has left us a written report.

On the other hand, we agreed that the crucifixion of Jesus was a public spectacle, open to all observers. The reports of

the passion of Jesus reflect a single story, with a variety of detail. Much of that detail was suggested by prophetic texts, including the Psalms. We were divided on whether some early stratum in the Gospel of Peter was the original source, or whether the passion narrative was created initially by Mark. The end result of these deliberations was to reverse the brief characterization that prevailed at the beginning of this century: the gospels, it was said, consisted of a passion narrative with an extended introduction. We conclude that the gospels were really a collection of sayings and anecdotes with a passion appendix.

In spite of these qualifications, or perhaps because of them, we concluded that a fairly substantial body of historical information about Jesus of Nazareth is recoverable from the gospels. In this respect, the Jesus Seminar falls somewhere in the middle of the spectrum: there are those who think the gospels contain virtually no history, and there are those who think that the canonical gospels are nothing but history.

I am aware how sketchy this brief summary is and how misleading it may be in some formulations.

● [3] **Knowledge of the historical Jesus matters for faith.** The first three theses bring us to a crucial junction in this series of propositions: Knowledge of the historical Jesus matters for faith.

*What is at issue?*

One way to put the problem is this: For the orthodox Christian community, faith was faith in the faith of the first disciples. We believe because they believed. And we believe what they believed.

For other believers, faith was faith in Jesus himself. Peter and others in the inner circle around Jesus apparently had faith directly in him: their faith was not mediated by someone else. The question arises: Can we know enough of the historical Jesus for us to say we have faith directly in him, without the intermediate agency of the first believers?

The issue is even more complicated than that. For some faith in Jesus is faith in him as the messiah, or son of man, or son of God. On this view, Jesus is the object of faith.

For others faith in Jesus is to trust what he trusted. On that view, it is not Jesus who is the object of faith; his Father, God, is the true object of faith. Better yet, his Father's kingdom is the real object of faith. Jesus did not call on people to believe in God; he called on them to trust the

creation, including other human beings. As he viewed it, the world is God's kingdom or God's domain. The object of Jesus' trust was his perception of how the world is meant to work.

This set of possibilities can be set out in three propositions, as we did earlier in identifying the three parties:

- (1) *Jesus points to the kingdom of God*
- (2) *Peter points to Jesus*
- (3) *The New Testament points to the apostles*

It would appear that faith in the New Testament is a derivative faith, twice removed from the kingdom of God. Even faith in the faith of Peter and the apostles is secondhand faith. The question then becomes: Did Jesus call on his followers to believe that he was the messiah, the apocalyptic son of Adam, or a miraculously begotten son of God? If he did not, were his followers justified in calling on subsequent believers to do so?

Jesus seems to have called on his followers to trust what he trusted, to believe that the world was God's domain, and to act accordingly. That dramatic shift in understanding could trail a radical reformation in its wake.

● [4] **The recovery of the historical figure of Jesus may well serve as the catalyst of a new beginning for the Christian movement as it enters the third millennium.**

A glimpse of the historical figure of Jesus may trigger a renewal of the Jesus movement. The words and deeds of Jesus were the catalyst of the original movement. There was an organized cluster of activities before there was an institution---a religion in the formal sense. The rediscovery of the historical Jesus may prompt the creation of a twenty-first century version of that early stage.

As the Jesus movement aged, an institution and an ideological orthodoxy began to emerge. As they did, the role of the words and deeds of Jesus began to diminish. What he did and said was gradually eclipsed by what was done to him---birth, crucifixion, resurrection---interpreted in the mythical framework of a dying/rising lord. By the time we come to the Apostles' Creed (mid second century), the acts and words of Jesus are no longer central. Indeed, the creed itself has an empty center---it lacks any reference to what Jesus said and did, only what was done to him.

The historical figure has been so overlaid with the Christian myth that the historical figure is overshadowed by the

adoration of him as the Christ. In the course of this development, the iconoclast became an icon.

If the Christian movement readmits Jesus into its counsels, he will be a powerful critic of sedimented institutions and orthodoxies. That is what happened in the waves of reformation that swept through Europe in the sixteenth and following centuries. His voice could again revamp Christian practice and belief.

Even a partial recovery of Jesus of Nazareth will serve to purge the clogged arteries of the institutional churches, arteries blocked with self-serving bureaucracies and theological litmus tests designed to maintain the status quo. His voice will redefine the nature and parameters of the Christian life.

Here are a few hints of what that voice is like.

#### 1. A trust ethic.

Most of us have been immersed in a work ethic: we labor to produce the goods of life and the good life and our virtue resides in that labor. Jesus advocated and practiced a trust ethic.

He admonished his followers to take no thought for the morrow, for food, clothing, and shelter. The flowers of the field and the birds of the sky were his paradigms of trust.

Passersby would supply urgent needs, as the parable of the Good Samaritan indicates. When a loaf of bread was required in the middle of the night to feed late-arriving guests, neighbors would respond because the laws of hospitality required it.

Like the Israelites in the Sinai desert, disciples are never to ask for more than one day's bread at a time. They need not plan ahead, for:

*Ask---it'll be given you;  
seek---you'll find;  
knock---it'll be opened for you.<sup>6</sup>*

Jesus has a fresh regard for the order of the natural world, the universe, its creator, and its inhabitants. He trusted God absolutely. He took preparations for the future to betray a lack of trust.

#### 2. Celebration.

Celebration is the by-product of trust. One reason the Seminar believes Jesus could not have been an apocalyptic prophet is his impulse to celebrate. Apocalyptic is for those

who mourn the corruption of creation; it is not a program for the future; it is the counsel of endtime despair.

Celebration runs like a golden thread through the authentic stories and witticisms of Jesus.

A woman loses a coin, sweeps the dirt floor of her house to find it, and then spends that coin and more to celebrate her good fortune.

A shepherd goes in search of a wayward sheep, leaving ninety-nine behind to fend for themselves. The successful recovery of the lost sheep prompts a celebration, which usually required the slaughter of a lamb, in this case perhaps the one that had just been recovered.

The father of a recalcitrant son celebrates the return of the prodigal by throwing an elaborate party after welcoming his son as an oriental potentate with robe, ring, and sandals. The frugal, loyal older son demurs at the extravagance.

Celebration is the natural aftermath of the discovery of a valuable pearl or a cache of coins in a field.

When Jesus is asked why he doesn't fast, he responds: "The groom's friends can't fast while the groom is present, can they?" Jesus celebrates at one symposium after another, to the extent that he acquired the reputation of being a "glutton and a drunk."<sup>7</sup>

A trust ethic and the celebration of life prompt Jesus to conceive of God's domain as a kingdom without boundaries and a society without brokers.

### 3. a. A kingdom without social barriers.

In contrast to the Mosaic code, which called on Israelites to honor father and mother, Jesus has this to say:

*If any of you comes to me and does not hate your own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters---yes, even your own life---you're no disciple of mine.*<sup>8</sup>

Kinship in God's domain transcended blood and tribal ties. In that realm, there is neither Jew nor gentile, slave nor free, male nor female, as Paul puts it, to which might be added, neither Greeks nor barbarians, neither Americans nor foreigners, neither heterosexual nor homosexual. Indeed, Jesus admonishes his followers to "love your enemies." Such love breaches the ultimate social barrier. The citizens of Jesus' kingdom were the poor, the hungry, the sad, the persecuted. Jesus advises his followers: "Those not against

us are for us."<sup>9</sup>

Jesus expresses this new code in an open table: he eats and drinks with the unclean, the socially ostracized, the toll collectors and prostitutes, in violation of established social mores. And yet, when the *Didache*---a second-century manual of discipline for the emerging church---sets down the rules for the eucharist, it stipulates that only those who have been baptized in the Lord's name may participate. The Christian community had already begun to put back into place the barriers that Jesus had torn down.

In the kingdom of God as Jesus envisioned it, there are no theological litmus tests. It is not what one believes that counts, but whether one is at home in a fenceless community.

### 3. b. A society without brokers.

For Jesus, God's domain has no use for brokers.

In a brokerage system, mediators are the necessary link between patrons like God and emperor and those in need. Jesus did away with all brokers.

He says to those whose paralysis or blindness has been cured: **your** faith has cured you. Not I have cured you. Not God has cured you.

In the parables Jesus invites listeners to cross over to the kingdom of God. However, they must make the move on their own initiative. They need not come by way of Jesus or even by way of God. Jesus could not have spoken the words the Gospel of John attributes to him: "No one comes to the Father unless it is through me."<sup>10</sup>

Those who require forgiveness can be forgiven only if they sponsor forgiveness: forgive and you'll be forgiven, says Jesus. Jesus is out of the loop; even God is out of the loop. In prayer, Jesus teaches his disciples to ask for the remission of debt only to the extent that they themselves have remitted the debts of others.

Jesus recommends that the rich young man sell all he has and give the proceeds to the poor. He doesn't say give it to me, or give it to the church.

The brokerless community Jesus had in mind stands in strong contrast to the broker-laden structure contemplated by the Pastoral Epistles and even the apostle Paul. Jesus obviates the need for mediating priests and clergy, even a mediating church.



#### 4. A kingdom without cult rituals.

The Jesus movement early on declared Jesus to be the broker of God's grace. They did so by interpreting his death as a blood sacrifice to compensate for the sins of humankind who were not qualified to atone for themselves. The old sacrificial system was thus carried forward in a new and more sophisticated form: only one sacrifice was needed because of the quality of its victim.

The sacrifice of Jesus was extended into the new institution by means of the Lord's Supper or the eucharist: "This is my body," "This is my blood," are the key phrases. It is doubtful that this sacrament can be traced back to Jesus. In any case, the idea of the atonement does not stem from Jesus: It is a contradiction of his fundamental dedication to a brokerless kingdom.

The same can be said of baptism. The practice is probably a carryover from earlier allegiances to John the Baptist. Jesus' indifference to purity codes and his apparent lack of interest in repentance suggest that the Fourth Gospel is correct: Jesus did not baptize; the practice belonged to his disciples, probably those who had previously been followers of John.<sup>11</sup>

Jesus' attitudes towards fasting and public piety are congruent with his notion of a brokerless kingdom: fasting does not go with celebration, and those who practice public piety have received all the reward they will ever get.

#### 5. The entrance to the kingdom

In his parables Jesus issues an invitation to cross over to God's domain. The rich are unable to find the door to the kingdom, but the poor, the hungry, the sad don't even have to look for it. That is because only those morally and religiously disqualified may enter. Put differently, insiders are out; outsiders are in. One should take care to understand these terms non-literally (in a kingdom without boundaries, there are no insiders and outsiders).

In the parable of the vineyard laborers, those who worked the entire day are disappointed in the standard wage; those who labored only one hour are paid the same amount. Those who did not expect to be invited to a royal banquet are

ushered into the hall in the parable of the Great Supper. The parable of the Pharisee and the Toll Collector contrasts the behavior of an "insider"---a pious Pharisee---with that of an "outsider"---a toll collector. Jesus endorses self-effacement rather than exhibitions of moral superiority.

To be an "insider" in the kingdom one must be an "outsider." That requirement is never rescinded. A sinner is an "outsider"--- from the standpoint of those who thought they were insiders. Krister Stendahl once remarked that Christians are indeed sinners, but they prefer to think of themselves as "honorary" sinners. For Jesus they are real sinners (outsiders).

In God's domain, Christians (insiders) are without privilege. Christians (insiders) are never superior to non-Christians (outsiders). Christians are not the exclusive brokers of God's grace. The irony is that many Christians claim superiority and monopoly in the name of the Jesus who never asked anything for himself and insisted that his disciples ask nothing for themselves.

Earlier I mentioned Rudolf Bultmann's suggestion that the Christian proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus was no longer believable unless it had been translated into non-mythical language. The fact that the kerygma and creed are no longer believable should have awakened us to the possibility that it may not be the appropriate vehicle for the Christian gospel.

In addition, the creed and kerygma may not square with what we know of the historical Jesus. The creed and kerygma are preoccupied with the status of Jesus rather than with the kingdom of God; with the status of the apostles and the church, rather than with Jesus' vision of a world under the direct aegis of his Father. We may be clinging to the kerygma only in order to retain our ecclesiastical brokerage systems. Jesus may prompt us to abandon the institutional church. Who would weep for its loss if its only function is to protect Christian privilege?

That is how radical the coming reformation may turn out to be.

## NOTES

1. Mark 8:29.
2. Mark 10:45.
3. Mark 1:16--18, 19--20.
4. Luke 5:1--11.
5. John 1:35--42, 43--51.
6. Luke 11:9--10.
7. Luke 7:31--35. The Fellows voted this passage gray on the grounds that the phrase "son of man" may have referred to the apocalyptic son of man. But they agreed that the contrast with John the Baptist was historically accurate.
8. Luke 14:26.
9. Mark 9:40.
10. John 14:6.
11. John 4:2.