

Shouldn't Evangelicals Participate in the 'Third Quest for the Historical Jesus'?

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Jesus the ?

In recent times there are literally shelf loads of books out purporting to give the real story on the 'historical Jesus'. It has almost reached the stage where religious studies libraries need to offer a 'Jesus the ...' section with titles such as *Jesus the Exorcist*, *Jesus the Healer*, *Jesus the Miracle Worker*, *Jesus the Sage*, *Jesus the Seer*, *Jesus the Jewish Theologian*, *Jesus the Prophet*, *Jesus the Man*, *Jesus the Magician*, *Jesus the Christ*, *Jesus the Jew* and *Jesus the Messiah* to name but a few. If that is not enough it has now reached the point where there are also a plethora of books being written about the scholarly accounts of Jesus.¹ So if you are not reading the books about Jesus you could be reading the books about Jesus. In this labyrinth of scholarship what is an evangelical to make of it? In particular, how should evangelicals react towards what has commonly become known as the 'Third Quest for the Historical Jesus'? Should any historical quest be rejected out of hand as 'dangerous' to orthodoxy or can it be embraced at least in part? It is in the midst of such turbulent questions that I will attempt to steer a course that is hopefully acceptable to evangelical faith and scholarship.

The quest for the historical Jesus and Jesus Christ superstar

With the onset of the Enlightenment in the 1700s the Scriptures came to be scrutinised by critical methods of historical research. The first major study of Jesus in this vain was

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conducted by H.S. Reimarus (1694-1768) and was entitled *Fragments*.² This presented Jesus as a revolutionary Zealot who was duly executed for insurrection, and the disciples then stole his body and then touted belief in a resurrection. Several other portraits of Jesus followed by scholars such as David Friedrich Strauss, Johannes Weiss, Ernst Renan and William Wrede. The purpose of such studies was twofold: (i) To destroy the orthodox picture of Jesus; and (ii) To erect another view of Jesus that was free from theological influence, that would be acceptable to the modern mind (i.e. nothing miraculous) and be a worthy moral example. This quest for the historical Jesus was brought to an abrupt end by Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965),

¹ Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press, 1994); B.D. Chilton and C.A. Evans, *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research* (Leiden: Brill, 1994); Craig A. Evans, *Life of Jesus Research: an annotated bibliography* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), Robert B. Strimple, *The Modern Search for the Real Jesus* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995); Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996); Ben Witherington, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (2nd edn.; Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1997), Mark Allan Powell, *The Jesus Debate: Modern Historians Investigate the Life of Christ* (Oxford, England: Lion, 1999).

² H.S. Reimarus, *Fragments*, trans, Ralph S. Fraser, ed. Charles H. Talbert (Chico, CA, Scholars Press, 1985 [1778]).

the German NT scholar and missionary doctor, in his book *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*.³ Schweitzer pointed out that all the various attempts to construct Jesus historically ended up doing little other than projecting their own aspirations onto Jesus. The liberal Jesus who proclaimed the love of God and the brotherhood of man was the imaginative invention of modern theology. Schweitzer's own study of Jesus yielded that of a Jewish apocalypticist who waited for the kingdom of God to come and when it did not arrive, he threw himself on the wheel of history to force its entry, only to have it roll back and crush him in the process.

Following Schweitzer's devastating critique, the intervening years between the First and Second World War saw a marked decrease in interest in historical Jesus study (though interest did not completely wane, especially amongst English-speaking scholars). This is partly attributable to the rise of Karl Barth's neo-orthodox theology and Rudolf Bultmann's demythologisation which made the Jesus of history either irrelevant or irretrievable, although both scholars strenuously denied this it seemed the logical implication of their work. Then in 1953 Ernst Käsemann presented a lecture at the University of Marburg on 'The Problem of the Historical Jesus'.⁴ Käsemann's contention was that Easter did not totally eradicate the continuity between Jesus and the early church. The primitive church never lost its interest in the life history of Jesus as being properly basic for faith. This led to a new impetus in the Jesus research which has subsequently become known as the 'New Quest' for the historical Jesus.⁵ Its notable proponents have included James Robinson, Günther Bornkamm, Norman Perrin, Eduard Schweizer, Ernst Fuchs, Eduard Schillebeeckx. The Jesus Seminar arguably belongs to this camp. The New Questers have felt a little more confident about outlining a life of Jesus by use of form critical tools. Yet they remained sceptical about the majority of material ascribed to Jesus in the gospels and they did not really extend our understanding of Jesus very far. When you introduce your book on Jesus with the words, 'No one is any longer in the position to write a life of Jesus'⁶ you don't really have very far

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to go. Despite constructing a more historically convincing portrait of Jesus, the resultant product was a Jesus who often looked far more like a twentieth-century Jewish existential philosopher than a first-century Jewish Messiah. In retrospect, when one looks at both the first and, to a much lesser extent, the New Quest for the historical Jesus the results appear to resemble a line from the opening song of Jesus Christ Superstar, 'I remember when this whole thing began, no talk of God then we called you a man. And believe me, my admiration for you hasn't died.'

Following the lyrics of Tim Rice, some scholars claim that they can see clearly through the corridors of history, they can see around the naiveté of dogma, they can see beyond the fog of faith and the Jesus they see is not the orthodox one. Jesus is a man, a brilliant man, a religious

³ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, trans. W. Montgomery (3rd edn.; Great Britain: Unwin, 1945 [1906]). It is available in complete form on the internet at <http://www.earlychristianwriting.com/schweitzer/index.html>. For an evaluation of Schweitzer's contribution see, Simon Gathercole, 'The Critical and Dogmatic Agenda of Albert Schweitzer's Quest of the Historical Jesus', *TynBul* 51 (2000): 261-83.

⁴ Ernst Käsemann, 'The Problem of the Historical Jesus', in *Essays on New Testament Themes*, trans. W.J. Montague (London: SCM, 1964).

⁵ See, James M. Robinson, *A New Quest for the Historical Jesus* (SBT 25, London: SCM, 1959).

⁶ Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. I. Mcliskey, F. Mcliskey and J. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 13.

genius even. He is a man who is also worthy of imitation, but he is not the same man as we find in the gospels. For the gospels have so radically re-worked the tradition that there remains only but the faintest whisper of the authentic voice of Jesus. That is perhaps an overly simplistic and somewhat unfair caricature of previous quests for Jesus, but I would maintain that at the core level it remains an accurate one.

The Jesus Quest Episode III: a new hope

In contrast to the scepticism of the 'First' and 'New Quest', a recent paradigm shift has occurred in historical Jesus studies in the last twenty years that has subsequently been called the 'Third Quest for the Historical Jesus'.⁷ What distinguishes the Third Quest from the New Quest are three main things:⁸

- i. An emphasis on the Jewish nature of Jesus and early Christianity. Whereas scholars in the Bultmannian era attempted to understand Jesus in the context of the theology of the early church, scholars are now studying Jesus within the context of first-century Judaism.⁹
- ii. A general consensus has emerged that Jesus' message was predominantly eschatological. The 'kingdom of God' to which much of Jesus' ministry was directed to does not refer to an egalitarian utopia but must be understood via the matrix of Jewish apocalyptic expectation; and
- iii. A greater degree of optimism concerning the historical reliability of traditions concerning Jesus in the canonical Gospels.¹⁰ One can compare the above statement by Bornkamm with the following statement by E.P. Sanders:

⁷ Stephen Neil and N.T. Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1986* (Oxford: OUP, 1988), 379-403; N.T. Wright, 'Quest for the Historical Jesus', in *ABD*, ed. David Noel Freedman (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:796-802.

⁸ Some scholars reject the idea of a 'Third' Quest preferring instead to see some strands of recent Jesus scholarship as simply an extension of the 'New' Quest. They also (rightly) deny that there ever was a moratorium of Jesus research between the First and New Quest. See, John Reumann, 'Jesus and Christology', in *The New Testament and its Modern Interpreters*, eds. E.J. Epp and G.W. MacRae (Atlanta: Scholars, 1989), 501-64; Dale C. Allison, Jr, 'The Contemporary Quest for the Historical Jesus', *IBS* 18 (1996): 174-80; S.E. Porter, *Criteria for Authenticity in Historical-Jesus Research: Previous Discussions and New Proposals* (JSNTSS 191, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 28-62.

⁹ James H. Charlesworth, 'Jesus Research: A Paradigm Shift for New Testament Scholars', *AusBR* 38 (1990): 22. See further and more extensively on the distinctives of the 'Third Quest', William R. Telford, 'Major Trends and Interpretive Issues in the Study of Jesus', in *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research*, eds. Bruce Chilton and C.A. Evans (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 57-58, Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 10-11.

¹⁰ One should compare the view of Norman Perrin that Jesus research should start with the assumption of the inauthenticity of a text in the Synoptic Gospels unless its authenticity can be demonstrated, with James H. Charlesworth who defends the exact opposite view, viz., that material in the Synoptic Gospels should be afforded the *prima facie* assumption of authenticity unless its inauthenticity can be demonstrated. Charlesworth bases this on three premises: (i) The intentionality of the texts imply it. (ii) Stories about Jesus were formulated and circulated within a few decades of his death where his followers (including eyewitnesses) attributed sayings, stories and actions to him. In contrast to the Rabbinic traditions (e.g. concerning Rabbi Hillel) that were not recorded till much later, the Jesus traditions took on written form in the same century that Jesus lived. (iii) The polemical context of the first Christians would make it difficult for anyone to deny the major facts of Jesus life (e.g. ministry in Galilee, Temple episode, crucifixion in Jerusalem etc.). Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1967), 39; James H. Charlesworth, 'The Historical Jesus: Sources and a

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The dominant view today seems to be that we can know pretty well what Jesus was out to accomplish, that we can know a lot about what he said and that those two things make sense within the world of first-century Judaism.¹¹

Catholic scholar John P. Meier lists what he thinks are the present gains from the Third Quest:

- i. The ecumenical and international dimension to the scholars involved in the research (as opposed to a band of Continental Lutherans),
- ii. A re-examination of various texts as reliable sources for the quest;
- iii. New insights from archaeology, philology and sociology in the illumination of Jesus and his context;
- vi. A more accurate picture of the diverse and variegated nature of Palestinian Judaism;
- v. Clarification of the criteria of historicity which has led to a more balanced appreciation of the historical traditions underlying the gospels;
- vi. A more positive treatment of the miracle traditions in the gospels; and vii. Taking the Jewishness of Jesus with seriousness.¹²

In my own view, it is precisely this Third Quest for the historical Jesus that provides the greatest possible hope for a more sympathetic reading of the gospels as historical sources and is likely to provide a reasonable answer as to why the church began, and why it believed what it did and acted how it did.

To Quest or not to Quest, that is the Quest-ion!

In support of the proposition that evangelicals should be actively engaged in the: Third Quest I would like to present several lines of argument.

Apprehensions which evangelicals have about historical Jesus research can be overcome. Some quarters of evangelicalism have reservations about any supposed historical quest for Jesus because it has limitations that are intrinsic to its purely historical character, it implies a discontinuity between the historical Jesus and the Christ who became the object of the church's faith. These people also have a methodological

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Sketch', in *Jesus Two Thousand Years Later*, eds. James H. Charlesworth and Walter P. Weaver (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 101.

¹¹ E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 2. Cf. Joachim Gnilka, *Jesus of Nazareth: Message and History* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 24.

¹² John P. Meier, 'The Present State of the "Third Quest" for the Historical Jesus: Loss and Gain', *Bib* 80 (1999): 459-87.

objection against the manner in which such research has been conducted before. These suspicions are warranted but can be assuaged.

First, there are restrictions as to what historical research can do. The historical Jesus is not the 'real Jesus' because historical research is fallible in both its methodology and the degree of subjectivism it requires of the historian. The 'historical Jesus' is the picture of Jesus that emerges from the application of various historical tools and by the formation of hypotheses. By the same token what historical research can do is help us to understand the meaning of a saying or event in its historical context and also to probe as to what grounds we have for thinking that this saying or event is historically authentic. It also serves to weave together a unified and coherent portrait of Jesus that makes sense in a Jewish milieu and establishes the basis and direction for the beliefs of the early church.

Second: Historical study of Jesus does not necessarily imply a discontinuity between the 'Jesus of History' and the 'Christ of faith'.¹³ Lamentably, some scholars in former quests did (and still do) take this line. The Third Quest is more willing to posit a meaningful and genuine connection between Jesus and early Christianity. This premise is already impregnated in Käsemann's agenda for the New Quest but it is methodologically prosecuted by proponents of the Third Quest. For instance Markus Bockmuehl writes, 'It is historically legitimate to see Jesus of Nazareth in organic, causal, continuity with the faith of the early church'.¹⁴ Any study of Jesus that does not take into account the follow-on effect that he had with his followers is historically deficient. This should warn us about making any unnecessary disjunction between a pre-Easter and post-Easter Jesus.

Third, evangelicals regard so-called 'criteria of authenticity' with a degree of suspicion. Often the various criteria (e.g. multiple attestation, dissimilarity, coherence) are employed to isolate authentic fragments of the Jesus tradition away from the various developments and accretions of later tradition.¹⁵ Scepticism towards this approach is justified over against the scissors and paste approach some scholars have taken in relegating certain material to be secondary accretions of tradition. The classic example of this stems from the Jesus seminar who are quick to relegate anything remotely eschatological in Jesus' teachings to later development. We, however, cannot disprove the authenticity of any passage with any degree of certainty thus the role of such criteria should be confined to that of a positive examination of the traditions underlying a saying or narrative. Notably, Hooker, Calvert, Stein, Jonge, and Blomberg all apply the criteria in this way.¹⁶ Additionally, talk of 'criteria' is misleading as it requires some degree of falsification or verification of which we cannot in reality adjudicate upon. It is

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¹³ See the well known work by Martin Kahler, *The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ*, trans. Carl E. Braaten (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964).

¹⁴ Markus Bockmuehl, *This Jesus: Martyr, Messiah, Lord* (Edinburgh: T. & T Clark, 1994), 8.

¹⁵ A helpful example of a positive employment of these criteria is in Paul Barrett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 172-73.

¹⁶ Morna D. Hooker, 'Christology and Methodology', *NTS* 17 (1971): 486; D.G.A. Calvert, 'An Examination of the Criteria for Distinguishing the Authentic Words of Jesus', *NTS* 18 (1972): 218; Robert Stein, 'The 'Criteria' of Authenticity', in *Gospel Perspectives*, eds R.T. France, David Wenham and Craig Blomberg (Sheffield: JSOT, 1980), 1:225-63; Stewart C. Goetz and Craig L. Blomberg, 'The Burden of Proof', *JSNT* 11 (1981): 39-58; Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001), 63-67.

far better to speak of an 'index' rather than 'criterion' as it denotes an indication of authenticity rather than a litmus test for historical truth.¹⁷ Biblical authority is then not endangered by historical research - on the contrary, provided one commences with a presupposition that does not exclude the supernatural, it can actually enhance it. Furthermore, it is of no benefit to rest on our theological laurels and simply to assert the historical nature of Biblical texts, rather, as Bruce Chilton wrote, 'A primary evangelical and critical task is, not to peddle our assumptions, but to encourage the sort of open, detailed inquiry which will vindicate them.'¹⁸

Christianity is a historical religion and by necessity it must remain open to historical inquiry or it will otherwise degenerate into docetism.

On one level, historical study of Jesus has an important place in terms of the church's witness to the world. If you could prove that Buddha never existed little would change in Buddhist religious practice; the four noble truths would still be noble and the eightfold path would remain the only means to attaining nirvana. Christianity, by contrast, stands or falls with its claim to historical character. Christianity appeals to the theatre of history as the domain of God's activity, and thus it is to historical study that we must go.¹⁹ There can be no question about it. At this point we cannot insulate ourselves from historical criticism by crying out for a different set of rules: that Jesus is 'supra-historical' or Easter is 'eschatological history' and therefore not verifiable according to canons of historical study. The result of such a retreat is that God is either so transcendent that he possesses no genuine relation to the space-time universe or else Christianity's key moments of revelation (e.g. Creation, Exodus, Calvary, and Pentecost) are abstracted from history. Lesslie Newbigin pointed out that the gospel is a public truth. It is therefore open to public inquiry. It is the evangelicals, including laity, ministers and scholars, who should be out there guiding this inquiry by their own interaction so as to point writers and readers to the Jesus who proclaimed and now embodies the gospel. William Lane Craig states:

For the evangelical church to remain silent at such a time as this and to allow the caricature of Jesus propounded by the Jesus Seminar to go uncontested would be an ill-conceived strategy indeed. Even if few people become Christians as a direct result of an apologetic argument, such defences do help to shape and preserve the intellectual milieu in which faith in the Jesus of the New Testament is still a rational alternative for most persons in our culture.²⁰

On another horizon, historical Jesus research also safeguards church belief and practice against ahistorical and docetic christological formulations. Luke Timothy Johnson chastises

¹⁷ The term 'index' is indebted to Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 85-87; cf. too Rainer Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer* (WUNT 2.7; Tübingen: Mohr, 1981), 86-87; Scot McKnight, *Interpreting the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988), 66-69, Dale C. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 7.

¹⁸ Bruce D. Chilton, 'An evangelical and critical approach to the sayings of Jesus', *Themelios* 3.3 (May 1978), 85.

¹⁹ G.B. Caird, *Jesus and the Jewish Nation* (London: Athlone, 1965), 3; N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 11

²⁰ William Lane Craig, 'Resurrection and the Real Jesus', in *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up: A Debate between William Lane Craig and John Dominic Crossan*, ed. Paul Copan (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 178.

Questers (of all kinds) by asserting that the real Jesus is not discovered by historical inquiry but is the one experienced in the faith and worship of the

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contemporary church.²¹ No card carrying evangelical would want to dispute that, but at the same time, we need a check and balance against this view unless it degenerates into religious solipsism (i.e. the real Jesus is the one 'I' experience). After all, whose experience of Jesus should be considered authoritative or normative for faith and piety? Should it be the Jesus of Jim Jones, the Jesus of ultra-Pentecostals, the Jesus of the Catholic Mass, the Jesus of Jehovah's Witnesses, the Jesus of American Fundamentalism, the Jesus of the Crusades? The danger is, to borrow William Lane Craig's colourful turn of phrase, that we add a little bit of pixie dust, make a wish and believe anything we like about Jesus.²² In addition, we must be cautious of the recent trend in literary and reader-orientated studies that they do not relativise Christianity's historical origins. The gospels tell a ripping good story but the story has a referent beyond itself in the historical figure of Jesus. It is crucial to remember this, for if Jesus is not to become the product of our own minds and aspirations we must vigilantly ensure that the Jesus of creeds, of worship, of faith, of scholarship, of liturgy, of devotion, of sermons and piety is the one and the same Jew who walked the plains of Palestine.

As N. T Wright has proposed, historical study of Jesus is a necessary task of discipleship.²³

How so? Sooner or later we must all ask the epochal question, 'Who is Jesus?' Even if you're an atheist you need to ponder 'Who is this Jesus I don't believe in?' For those of us who grew up in the household of faith sooner or later we make our faith our own by responding to Jesus for ourselves. If we have a passion to know Jesus and to make him known that will invariably draw us to the historical nature of his life and times.

Critical or non-conservative scholarship needs to be engaged, not ignored by evangelicalism.

I applaud the efforts of books that present dialogue between conservatives and non-conservatives, that promote interest in the study of Jesus and an understanding of opposing interpretations of Jesus. In particular the book, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* by N.T. Wright and Marcus Borg²⁴ represents a sterling effort by two very different, but learned scholars on how their scholarship impacts their faith. Another reason for reading and dialoguing with critical scholars is that we cannot refute their views without first reading them. We must also be seen to be disagreeing with them which provides an impetus for publishing books that interact with these scholars. That does not justify an *ad hominem* rejection but a well thought out gracious critique. By the same token we need to concede that it is possible to learn a great deal about Jesus from liberal and critical scholars. For example, John Dominic Crossan's, *The Historical Jesus*,²⁵ despite its erroneous conclusion, is a lucid

²¹ Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, ch. 6.

²² William Lane Craig, 'Opening Address', in *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up: A Debate between William Lane Craig and John Dominic Crossan*, ed. Paul Copan (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 32.

²³ N.T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus* (London: SPCK, 2000), 14-15.

²⁴ N.T. Wright and Marcus J. Borg, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998).

²⁵ John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991).

and well written book in which one can learn much about the social, political and cultural climate of the Mediterranean in

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Jesus' day. Similarly, Marcus Borg's, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teaching of Jesus*,²⁶ is another book with several glaring errors and poignant insights. The danger is that by studying these scholars we may come under their spell and be induced to worship at the altar of scholarly respectability. That is simply the risk and reality of living in an unredeemed world. The alternative, withdrawal and estrangement, is not acceptable. Evangelicals cannot be the salt of the earth in absence. In this regard one can take lessons from several scholars of evangelical persuasion who are involved in the Third Quest including N.T. Wright, Richard Bauckham, Darrell L. Bock, Markus Bockmuehl, Scot McKnight, Peter Stuhlmacher, Graham Twelftree, Craig A. Evans and Ben Witherington to name a few. These scholars have interacted with the best of contemporary scholarship and have still been willing to put up their hand as retaining their orthodox beliefs.²⁷

Historical study of Jesus Christ reminds us that knowing Christ is not just a matter of knowing the benefits of his death and resurrection as applied to the believer in the doctrine of redemption but pertains also to understanding the various facets of his earthly existence.

Any study of Jesus Christ should involve rigorous appraisal of his aims and agendas in their historical context. Sadly, Protestant theology with its emphasis on the crucified, risen and exalted Jesus has led to a reading of Jesus in the Gospels which is skewed. We are given a picture of a sinless birth, a sin-bearing death and a lot of moralising in between. The entire life and teaching of Jesus becomes little more than an overture to Calvary.²⁸ Christology in essence becomes reducible to soteriology. Without jettisoning the crucial meaning and significance of the cross-resurrection we need concurrently to recognise that Jesus came in a certain period, to a certain people, with a certain message that carried certain connotations for his hearers. Things that Jesus said may well have been tied in some way to the socio-political climate of his day. We need not resort to spiritualising in order to make Jesus relevant to the modern world. The message of the kingdom of God meant that the climatic moment Israel has been waiting for was about to come to its gripping conclusion. The Messianic community left in the aftermath of Jesus' life and death has a crucial role in the continuing story of how God intends to repossess the world for himself. Historical Jesus research can also assist in answering questions concerning Jesus not naturally answered by simply amassing an assortment of proof texts from the gospels. Such questions might include: who did Jesus think he was? Did Jesus envisage a future mission to the Gentiles? What was Jesus' position vis-à-vis Israel? How did Jesus relate to the major Jewish sects of his day? Answers to these questions are implicit within the gospel tradition but they need to have the gaps in our knowledge filled out in order to form a more coherent grasp of who Jesus was. In this sense historical Jesus research makes an invaluable contribution to a biblical theology by

²⁶ Marcus J. Borg, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teaching of Jesus* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998).

²⁷ Evangelical participation in historical Jesus research could potentially reach a new high with the forthcoming *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* where, I hope, evangelical voices will be heard in the midst of scholarly discussion.

²⁸ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 14.

demonstrating the link between Israel, Jesus and the church historically as well as theologically.

In the manner I am proposing, historical research is a type of 'Christology from below' and it provides a crucial presupposition to 'Christology from above' as it seeks to

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anchor the (dogmatic) theology of the church in historical realities. There should be no bipolarisation between history and theology: historical study must be performed with some theological presumption and the history of Jesus emits far-reaching theological significance.²⁹ Theology without history degenerates into docetism, whilst history without theology is reduced to an inane and prosaic catalogue of biographical facts.

The most suitable response evangelicals can make to the Third Quest is 'critical appropriation'.

Many valuable insights can be taken on board from proponents of the Third Quest. Yet at the same time many of the views being propounded in its wake should not be digested uncritically. Sadly, the Third Quest has produced its own share of questionable accounts of Jesus. Bruce D. Chilton's recent book *Rabbi Jesus* comes immediately to mind as he (untypically) makes some outlandish inferences about Jesus.³⁰ S.G.F. Brandon's book *Jesus and the Zealots*.³¹ (incipiently a part of the Third Quest) attempted to resurrect the hypothesis that Jesus was a Jewish revolutionary. The problem with this thesis is that it poses a radical discontinuity between Jesus and his followers that is hard to fathom for if Jesus was such a revolutionary then why didn't his early followers continue in the attempted liberation of Palestine? Instead they took their message to the Gentiles that the God of Israel could redeem the pagans and make them his people. As with other religious movements in Palestine we should expect a close connection between a charismatic religious leader and his followers. The Essenes at Qumran persisted in the tradition of the Teacher of Righteousness. The ideals of Judas the Galilean were preserved in like like-minded insurgents until their mass suicide at Masada around AD 73; disciples of John the Baptist spread as far as Ephesus keeping the ascetic prophet's name alive (Acts 18:25; 19:1-7); the Pharisaic school of Hillel continued propagating the teachings of their leader well into the Rabbinic era. For this reason, asserting that Jesus was a Zealot poses a problem of historical discontinuity that is roughly analogous to trying to explain why a group of Al-Qaeda terrorists have traded their guns for guitars and have established a hippie commune in down-town Manhattan.

We must be cautious before diving into the Third Quest and be wary of exactly how shallow the scholarly waters can be. We should read with care and alertness, learn from and even engage in the renewed study of the Galilean peasant from Nazareth who changed the world. As 1 Thessalonians 5:21 says, 'Test everything; hold fast on that which is good'.

²⁹ On theological significance of the historical quest for Jesus see, John P. Meter, *A Marginal Jew. Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 1:198-200; Colin Brown, 'Christology and the Quest of the Historical Jesus', in *Doing Theology for the People of God: Studies in Honour of J.I. Packer*, eds. Donald Lewis and Alister McGrath (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), 67-83; Leander E. Keck, *Who is Jesus. History in Perfect Tense* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2000).

³⁰ Bruce D. Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 2000).

³¹ S.G.F. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967).

Conclusion

In the foregoing arguments I have attempted to legitimise the involvement of the evangelical church in the Third Quest for the historical Jesus. The basis of this is quite

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simple: historical study of Jesus is a necessary task of discipleship and mission. The Third Quest also provides us with the right kind of tools we will need to undertake the project and it gives us an area of discourse to draw upon. Moreover, historical study of Jesus gets both Christians and non-Christians to ask the right question, namely who is Jesus? Amongst the myriad of answers available on book shelves, the internet and on television we need to offer a compelling alternative to the pseudo-lives-of-Jesus being presented to the public. The tragedy is: books which masquerade as scholarship often filter down into popular thinking. I have conversed with many non-Christians about Jesus and have been informed of some interesting facts that contemporary biblical scholarship is yet to appropriate. I have heard about the Jesus who went to India to study transcendental mediation. One gentleman tried to convince me that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene. I lament further that most book stores that I frequent usually have in their religion section a Good News Bible, a biography of the Dalai Lama, a collection of poems by Helen Steiner Rice and inevitably some highly imaginative book about Jesus by the likes of Bishop Spong, A.N. Wilson or Barbara Thiering. Thus I contend that the only acceptable alternative is to studiously engage in our own quest for Jesus, as each generation must do for itself. In the press, in the pulpit and in person we must force a pluralistic world and a lethargic church to be confronted once more by the man and his message: Jesus Christ and the reign of God. As I. Howard Marshall urged us to do nearly three decades ago, we need to boldly confess, 'I believe in the historical Jesus'.³²

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³² I. Howard Marshall, *I Believe in the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977).