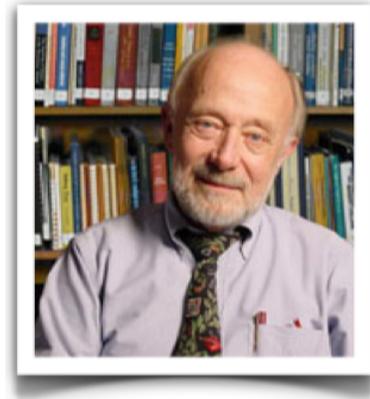


Meeting Jesus Again For The First Time

The gospels are the church's memories of the historical Jesus transformed by the community's experience and reflection in the decades after Easter.

This understanding of the gospel is the basis for the well-known scholarly distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. The first phrase refers to Jesus as the particular person he was - Jesus of Nazareth, a Galilean Jew of the first century who was executed by the Romans. The second phrase refers to the Christ of the developing Christian tradition - namely, what Jesus became in the faith of the early Christian communities in the decades after his death.



The picture of Jesus in John is clearly quite different from the picture of Jesus in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In John, Jesus speaks as a divine person. I am the bread of life, the light of the world, the vine, the way, the truth and the life. I and the Father are one, He who has seen me has seen the Father. In the synoptic gospels, Jesus speaks very differently; his message is not about himself or his identity.

The pre-Easter Jesus consistently pointed away from himself to God. His message was theocentric, not christocentric - centered in God, not centered in a messianic proclamation about himself. Though compassion as the content of Jesus' imitatio dei was rooted in the Jewish tradition, it was not the dominant imitatio dei of the first-century Jewish social world. Instead, a different imitatio dei, also grounded in the Hebrew Bible, had become the primary paradigm shaping the Jewish social world: "Be holy as God is holy."

It is in the conflict between these two imitation deis - between holiness and compassion as qualities of God to be embodied in community - that we see the central conflict in the ministry of Jesus: between two different social visions. The dominant social vision was centered in holiness; the alternative social vision of Jesus was centered in compassion. Holiness eventually became understood to mean "separation from everything unclean." One's purity status depended to some extent to birth, behavior, Jew or Gentile. In the message and activity of Jesus, we see an alternative social vision: a community shaped not by the ethos and politics of purity, but by the ethos and politics of compassion. Compassion, not holiness, is the dominant quality of God, and is therefore to be the ethos of the community that mirrors God.

An interpretation of Scripture faithful to Jesus and the early Christian movement sees the Bible through the lens of compassion, not purity.

Conventional wisdom is the dominant consciousness of any culture. It is a culture's most taken-for-granted understanding about the way things are and about the way to live. It is "what everybody knows" - the world that everybody is socialized into through the process of growing up. Enculturated consciousness, a consciousness shaped and structured by culture or tradition ... Page 75-80 ... Jesus' subversion of conventional wisdom is a subversion not only of the central convictions of his social world, but of many common forms of Christianity as well.

Jesus' own self-understanding did not include thinking and speaking of himself as the Son of God whose historical intention or purpose was to die for the sins of the world, and his message was not about believing in him. Rather, he was a spirit person, subversive sage, social prophet, and movement founder

who invited his followers and hearers into a transforming relationship with the same Spirit that he himself knew, and into a community whose social vision was shaped by the core value of compassion. Story theology not only emphasizes the centrality of story in the biblical tradition, but also criticizes much of Christian theology and modern historical scholarship for having obscured or eclipsed this feature. Theology, with its natural inclination toward conceptualization, has typically sought to extract a core of meaning from a story, which is then expressed in non-narrative form. The story as story is lost. Modern historical study of the Bible has also tended to lose the story, either by seeking the history behind the story or by an analytical approach that often loses the story by focusing on its bits and pieces. In both cases, the story as story disappears.

Religious laws speak of how to behave; theology and doctrine speak of how to understand and what to believe; but stories appeal to the imagination, to that place within us where our images of reality, life, and ourselves reside.

Conventional wisdom is life under the lordship of culture, which is both oppressive and alienating, and his message is filled with the theme of liberation and return.

The author of Hebrews uses the priestly story to subvert the priestly story. Within the traditions of the early Christian movement, the priestly story was used to negate the priestly story. There is an unfortunate irony here. In the documents that became the New Testament, imaging the death of Jesus as a sacrifice for sin originally subverted the priestly story; but when the New Testament became sacred Scripture, these same texts established the priestly story as the central Christian story. As a consequence the emphasis changed from seeing the story of Jesus-as-sacrifice as undermining the priestly story to believing in the priestly story (with Jesus now as the central figure in the story).

Disciple: It does not mean to be a "student of a teacher," but rather to be "a follower after somebody." Discipleship in the New Testament is, of course, a following after Jesus, a journeying with Jesus. Journeying with Jesus also means to be in a community, to become part of the alternative community of Jesus. Gather the folks, tell the stories, break the bread.

And discipleship involves becoming compassionate. "Be compassionate as God is compassionate" is the defining mark of the follower of Jesus. Compassion is the fruit of life in the Spirit and the ethos of the community of Jesus. It is a vision of the Christian life as a journey of transformation, exemplified by the story of discipleship as well as by the exodus and exile stories. It leads from life under the lordship of culture to the life of companionship with God.

It is an image of the Christian life not primarily as believing or being good but as a relationship with God. That relationship does not leave us unchanged but transforms us into more and more compassionate beings, "into the likeness of Christ." It is the vision of the Christian life spoken of so eloquently by Paul in a densely packed passage in 2 Corinthians: "And we all, with unveiled faces, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the likeness of Christ from one degree of glory to another. And this comes from the Lord, the Spirit." Beholding the Spirit, we are being changed into the likeness of Christ.

I want to close by talking about a very familiar Christian phrase - believing in Jesus - and how it is related to the image of the Christian life that has emerged in this book. For those of us who grew up in the church, believing in Jesus was important. For me, what that phrase used to mean, in my childhood and into my early adulthood, was "believing things about Jesus." To believe in Jesus meant to believe what the gospels and the church said about Jesus. That was easy when I was a child, and became more and more difficult as I grew older.

But now I see that believing in Jesus can (and does) mean something very different from that. The change is pointed to by the root meaning of the word believe. Believe did not originally mean believing a set of doctrines or teachings; in both Greek and Latin its roots mean "to give one's heart to." The "heart" is the self at its deepest level. Believing, therefore, does not consist of giving one's mental assent to something, but involves a much deeper level of one's self. Believing in Jesus does not mean believing doctrines about him. Rather, it means to give one's heart, one's self at its deepest level, to the post-Easter Jesus who is the living Lord, the side of God turned toward us, the face of God, the Lord who is also the Spirit. One can see this also in the German word *belieben*, which is the immediate root of the English word *believe*. *Belieben* does not mean "to believe," but rather "to beloved." Thus to believe is more properly understood as "to beloved."

Believing in Jesus in the sense of giving one's heart to Jesus is the movement from secondhand religion to firsthand religion, from having heard about Jesus with the hearing of the ear to being in relationship with the Spirit of Christ. For ultimately, Jesus is not simply a figure of the past, but a figure of the present. Meeting that Jesus - the living Jesus who comes to us even now - will be like meeting Jesus again for the first time.

Agnostic About the Afterlife

I am a committed Christian and a complete agnostic about the afterlife. I use "agnostic" in its precise sense: one who does not know. Moreover, I know that I cannot resolve "not knowing" by "believing" - whatever we believe about an afterlife has nothing to do with whether there is one or what it is like. There is more to say. I think that conventional Christianity's emphasis on the afterlife for many centuries is one of its negative features. I have often said that if I were to make a list of Christianity's ten worst contributions to religion, it would be its emphasis on an afterlife, for more than one reason.

When the afterlife is emphasized, it is almost inevitable that Christianity becomes a religion of requirements and rewards. If there is a blessed afterlife, it seems unfair to most people that everyone gets one, regardless of how they have lived. So there must be something that differentiates those who get to go to heaven from those who don't - and that something must be something we do, either believing or behaving or some combination of both. And this counters the central Christian claim that salvation is by grace, not by meeting requirements.

Another problem: the division between those who "measure up" and those who don't leads to further distinctions: between the righteous and the unrighteous, the saved and the unsaved.

Another problem: an emphasis on the afterlife focuses our attention on the next world rather than on this world. Most of the Bible, on the other hand, focuses our attention on our lives in this world and the transformation of this world. At the heart of the Lord's Prayer is the petition for the coming of God's kingdom on earth: *your kingdom come on earth, as it already is in heaven*. There is nothing in the Lord's Prayer asking that God take us to heaven when we die.

As yet another reason for my agnosticism about an afterlife: does it involve the survival of personal identity and reunion with those we have known in this life? Are family reunions part of the afterlife? For some people, this is much to be desired, for family has been the primary source of love and joy in this life. But for perhaps an equally large number of people, family has been the primary source of pain and unhappiness. So, are we going to be with those people forever?

What I do affirm about what happens after death is very simple: when we die, we do not die into nothingness, but we die into God. In the words of the apostle Paul, we live unto the Lord and we die unto the Lord. So whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For me, that is enough. My not knowing anything more does not bother me at all.

And I am very wary when the Christian gospel becomes a message about the afterlife. I am convinced that it invariably leads to distortion. This is not the Christian gospel.

God Provides, Doesn't Protect

I believe that God is present everywhere, in everything - that the universe is shot through with the radiant presence of God. Thus we are always "in God," even as God is more than the universe. But to say that God is everywhere and in everything does not mean that God is the cause, directly or indirectly, of everything that happens. To say the obvious, utterly horrible things happen in the world, and with great frequency. To imagine that these somehow fit into the long-term purposes of God is blasphemous. Rather, we are creatures who are able to act (as we often do) in ways contrary to God's purpose and dream. And more: tragedies like the shootings and deaths at Virginia Tech indicate, in my judgment, that thinking of God as an interventionist is impossible as well as unhelpful. If God could have intervened to stop this (or the Holocaust, or 9/11, or the war in Iraq, or the individual tragedies that never make the news), but chose not to, what kind of sense does that make? We live in a world still under the sway of "the powers" - powers in individual and collective lives that lead us away from God and God's passion for life on earth. But in the midst of all this, there is a source of sustenance that can help us in the darkest night. The most concise expression of this that I have heard comes from the late William Sloane Coffin, who died a year ago this month. He said - and I am confident of his "gist," if not his exact words: "God provides maximum support, but minimal protection."

Does God as an interventionist protect us? No. Does God provide a means of support in the midst of our tragedies? Yes.

Easter About Life, not Death

As I understand Easter, to the extent that Easter can be understood, it is not about something happening to the corpse of Jesus, but about the continuing experience of Jesus among his followers after his death. And it is not just about experiencing him as one might experience a ghost, but experiencing him as "Lord," as a divine reality who is one with God and who invites our allegiance and loyalty.

All of this is included in the early Christian post-Easter affirmation, "Jesus is Lord." The lords of this world - a collusion of religious authorities with Roman imperial authority - said "No" to Jesus and executed him. Easter is the reversal of Good Friday: it means that God has vindicated Jesus, said "Yes" to Jesus and his vision over against the rulers of his world. God has made him "both Lord and Christ," as Acts 2.36 puts it. "Jesus is Lord" is the most common post-Easter affirmation of his significance. He is Lord - and the would-be lords of this world are not.

Were the skeletal remains of Jesus to be indisputably identified, it would not matter to me. To think that the central meaning of Easter depends upon something spectacular happening to Jesus' corpse misses the point of the Easter message and risks trivializing the story. To link Easter primarily to our hope for an afterlife, as if our post-death existence depends upon God having transformed the corpse of Jesus, is to reduce the story to a politically-domesticated yearning for our survival beyond death.

Rather, what mattered for his early followers was that they continued to know him as a living figure of the present after his death – not just during the forty days of appearances that the author of Acts mentions (Acts 1.3), but in the years and decades (and centuries) ever since. And to affirm, as Christians do, that the living presence of Jesus is Lord is to commit oneself to the story of Jesus as the central revelation of God's dream for the world. It means to stand against the powers that killed him and to stand for the vision of God's kingdom that he proclaimed.

Easter is both personal and political. The lordship of Jesus is the path of personal liberation from the lords of culture, and the affirmation of a very different kind of world. To lose this emphasis in a debate about what happened to the corpse of Jesus is to be distracted by the lords who killed him.

Yes and No

Yes, Jesus is the Son of God, Lord and Christ; the Light of the World and the Bread of Life; and the Way, Truth and Life. He is all of this for me, as a Christian who is also a historian of early Christianity. And yet I do not think that Jesus spoke of himself with these grand terms and phrases.

Together with most mainstream scholars, I see the gospels as containing earlier and later layers of Christian traditions about Jesus as they developed during the first century. The gospels (and to some extent, the New Testament as a whole) contain the early Christian movement's memory of Jesus and their testimony to what Jesus had become in early Christian experience, conviction and thought.

In shorthand that I often use, the gospels are about both the pre-Easter Jesus (Jesus as a figure of history before his death) and the post-Easter Jesus (what Jesus became after his death).

As a historian who is also Christian, I do not think that the pre-Easter Jesus spoke about himself as the Son of God, or as Lord, or as the Light of the World, and so forth. Of course, I know that the gospels attribute this kind of language to him, so it is not a refutation of this position to quote the gospels against it.

But – again with the majority of mainstream scholarship, a point that I repeat not to give my perception authority, but to indicate that it is not eccentric or peculiar to me - I see this language as the early Christian movement's testimony, their witness, to what Jesus had become in their lives.

I see the pre-Easter Jesus as a Jewish mystic who knew God, and who as a result became a healer, wisdom teacher, and prophet of the kingdom of God. The latter led to his being killed by the authorities who ruled his world. But I do not think he proclaimed or taught an extraordinary status for himself. The message of the pre-Easter Jesus was about God and the kingdom of God, and not about himself.

Rather, I see the grand statements about Jesus – that he is the Son of God, the Light of the World, and so forth - as the testimony of the early Christian movement. These are neither objectively true statements

about Jesus nor, for example in this season, about his conception and birth. To speak of him as the Son of God does not mean that he was conceived by God and had no biological human father. Rather, this is the post-Easter conviction of his followers.

Is that enough for me as a Christian? Yes, yes it is. To be Christian is to affirm that Jesus is the Son of God and Lord, and that the would-be lords of this world are not. So, even as I do not think that Jesus' status as Son of God is because of his conception, I affirm the early Christians conviction that he is, for those of us who follow him the Son of God, the Lord, the Light of the World.

He is all of this for Christians – and we do not need to negate the other enduring religions of the world in order to say: for those of us who are Christian, he is the decisive revelation of God's character and passion. He is for us the Son who discloses the Father, the light who shines in our darkness, the Lord who comes each Christmas. And there are other revelations of God. But affirming Jesus as the Son of God means: this is who he is for those of us who follow him.

Jesus

The emergence paradigm sees the gospels and the Bible very differently than the traditional view. Indeed, for the study of Jesus, this is the most central difference. Rather than seeing them as a divine product and therefore as inerrant, and rather than interpreting them literally and factually, it sees them as human historical products that are to be read as a combination of historical memory and metaphorical narrative. This change in how the Bible and the gospels are seen is the paradigm shift that marks the birth of the modern historical study of Jesus.

The pre-Easter Jesus was not God, but God was the central reality of his life. Thinking that the word "God" refers to a being separate from the universe, "out there" and "not here," is a major cause of modern atheism, agnosticism, and skepticism.

Participatory Eschatology: Jesus called people to respond and participate in the coming of the kingdom. God's will for the earth, God's passion for this world, is very different from what we see around us. To his hearers he said, "Can you see that?" And he sought to open the eyes of the blind, to set free the captives and oppressed, to proclaim the jubilee of God. This is participatory eschatology.

Substitutionary atonement leads to "vampire Christians" - Christians interested in Jesus blood but little else. It is rather about following the way of the cross - commitment to the path of personal transformation as symbolized by the cross, and commitment to the path of confrontation with domination systems, equally symbolized by the cross.

Jesus spoke to peasants as a voice of religious protest against the central economic and political institutions of his day. He attracted a following, took his movement to Jerusalem at the season of Passover, and there challenged the authorities with public acts and public debates. All of this was his passion, what he was passionate about - God and the kingdom of God, God and God's passion for justice. To think of Jesus's passion as simply what happened on Good Friday is to separate his death from the passion that animated his life. Did Good Friday have to happen? As divine necessity? No. As human inevitability? Virtually.

Good Friday is the collision between the passion of Jesus and the domination system of his time. What killed Jesus was nothing unusual. There is no reason to think that the temple authorities were particularly

wicked people. We might have enjoyed their company. Moreover, as empires go, Rome was better than most. There was nothing exceptional or abnormal about it; this is simply the way domination systems behave. So common is this dynamic that, as suggested earlier, it can be called the normalcy of civilization. According to the gospels, Jesus did not die for the sins of the world. The language of sacrificial substitution is absent from their stories. but in an important sense, he was killed because of the sins of the world. The injustice of the domination system killed him, injustice so routine that it is part of civilization's normalcy. Though sin means more than this, it includes this. Jesus was executed because of the sins of the world. The domination system killed him.

The way of Jesus involves not just any kind of death, but specifically "taking up the cross," the path of confrontation with the domination system and its injustice and violence. His passion was the kingdom of God, what life would be like on earth if God were king and the rulers and systems of this world were not. It is the world that the prophets dreamed of - a world of distributive justice in which everybody has enough, in which war is no more, and in which nobody need be afraid. It is not simply a political dream, but God's dream, a dream that can be realized only by our being grounded ever more deeply in the God whose heart is justice. Jesus's passion got him killed. But God has vindicated Jesus. This is the political meaning of Good Friday and Easter.

Most of us are familiar with the question, "Do you accept Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior?" It is a crucially important question, for the lordship of Jesus is the path of personal transformation for Christians. But taking seriously the way of the cross means that there is an equally important question, identical except for one word: "Do you accept Jesus Christ as your political Lord and Savior?"

To take Jesus seriously is to follow him. To follow him is to participate in his passion. And his passion was God and the kingdom of God. The way of the cross leads to life in God and participation in the passion of God as known in Jesus. Being a Christian is not complicated. At its center is Jesus, whose passion was God, the way, and the kingdom.

This vision of life is deeply centered in God, the sacred. So it was for Jesus. So it is in all of the enduring religions of the world. What makes Christianity Christian is centering in God as known in Jesus. Two transformations are at the center of this life. For want of better language, I call them the personal and the political. The Christian life is about personal transformation into the likeness of Christ; and it is about participation in God's passion for the kingdom of God. The personal and the political are brought together in "the way of the cross" - an image of personal transformation and confrontation with the domination systems of this world.

It is a way of being Christian in which beliefs are secondary, not primary. Christianity is a "way" to be followed more than it is about a set of beliefs to be believed. Practice is more important than "correct" beliefs. Beliefs are not irrelevant; they do matter. But they are not the object of faith. God is the "object" of commitment - and for Christians, God as known in Jesus.

It is a life of deep commitment and gentle certitude. Deep commitment, because it involves one's whole being. Gentle certitude, because it is gentle, soft, regarding particular verbal formulations of Christianity, including precise doctrinal statements. These are always human products. They are to be valued as such and to be reformulated when necessary. Depth of commitment and dogmatic certainty about a particular set of beliefs are not the same thing.

In all of this, church matters. By "church" I mean local congregations, local communities of Christians, as well as the church aggregate. The church has more than one central function.

Churches are to be communities of transformation. This means being communities of re-socialization. Most of the readers of this book have been socialized into modern Western culture, and most of us into American culture in particular. To be Christian is to be re-socialized into a different understanding of reality and way of life - to live in relationship to another Lord and vision, to be shaped by the Bible and Jesus. Being Christian doesn't mean being anti-American, but it does mean that Christian identity and loyalty matter more than national identity and loyalty. When there is a conflict, Jesus is Lord. The church is the community that proclaims, incubates, and nourishes the lordship of Christ.

Another central function of the church is that it exists for the sake of the world. It does not exist for its own sake. It is grounded in God who "so loved the world," not God who so loved the church and Christians in particular. The church is to be a mediator, an instrument, of God's passion for the world's well-being.

And the church is the community that remembers and celebrates Jesus. Without such communities, the memory of Jesus would disappear. The saying that the church is always one generation away from vanishing is true.

So it is important to be part of a Christian community - not because it's a requirement for salvation, but because of the church's role as a community of transformation into an identity in Christ. God does not need the church. But Christians do. God can get along without the church. But we cannot. Being a Christian is not complicated. At its center is Jesus, whose passion was God, the way, and the kingdom.

For Christians the unending conversation about Jesus is the most important conversation there is. He is for us the decisive revelation of God - of what can be seen of God's character and passion in a human life. There are other important conversations. But for followers of Jesus, the unending conversation about Jesus is the conversation that matters most.