

# Jesus Seminar

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## 1. I Believe 'in' Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Recently I was visiting a sick minister in hospital. He told me of a 95 year old Indian man in the next bed who every morning prayed aloud and began by saying, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth...and in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord...."

I believe in God...in Jesus Christ, his Son.

The tiny word 'in' says it all. Our Christian faith is not a religion of virtue, nor of repeated rituals, nor of following the example of our founder, which would somehow counterbalance our moral shortcomings. No, we believe 'in' God, and 'in' Christ, in particular, for the forgiveness of our sins and our acceptance by grace with God our Father.

What makes a person a Christian depends on a right understanding of little words like 'in' and 'to'. We believe 'in' Christ and we turn 'to' Christ, as our baptism liturgy reminds us. But we do this because we believe critical things 'about' Christ, 'that' he is the Son of God, 'that' he died for our sins and 'that' he was raised the third day for our hope of life in God's kingdom, 'that' he will come again. We believe 'that' Jesus is the Son of God as the basis for our personal belief 'in' him.

Here we are at the very heart of Christian faith and spirituality which has blessed the lives of millions of people across many cultures over two millennia, spanning various traditions.

But if it is not true 'that' Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, who revealed God uniquely in his life and teaching, 'that' his death and resurrection were for our salvation, then Jesus is no longer One 'in' whom we believe. He is, at best, one whose life and example we follow. Thus we would speak of 'the faith of Jesus,' the spirituality of Jesus' not faith 'in' Jesus. And, if he is not the One 'in' whom we trust, it follows that he is but one among others whom we might in some way follow. So Jesus would take his place alongside Gandhi, Buddha, Confucius and Mohammed and other sages and prophets.

But this is precisely the view of Jesus taken by the JS.

## 2. The Jesus Seminar.

The Jesus Seminar is a group of mostly US scholars who began meeting 1985 under the leadership of Dr Robert Funk. Their initial interest was on 'What did Jesus really say?' which they answered in a book called *The Five Gospels* (1993). By colour coding sayings of Jesus from 'red' (authentic) through pink and grey to black (inauthentic) the Seminar believes it is getting close to the 'real' Jesus. The JS believes a radical and new Jesus, the 'forgotten' Jesus is emerging from its researches into the text of the gospels.

One novelty is the JS's use of a fifth gospel, the Gospel of Thomas, discovered 1945 in Egypt but not taken too seriously as a sayings source for Jesus until the advent of the JS. The JS dates the Gospel of Thomas c. 50, but almost all other scholars date it 100 years later.

The parables of Jesus, in particular, are where we are supposed to hear the authentic 'voice print' of Jesus. This Jesus is a 'sage,' an enigmatic 'wise' man who is more in the Greek cynic tradition than recognisable as one of the succession of prophets of Israel. He does not speak about himself, nor about the future; the kingdom is only here and now as you radically trust the father in hearing the pithy words of this Galilean. His intention is to subvert existing structures to bring about 'bottom up' social reform.

The JS proposes that there were originally churches which held to the beliefs about Jesus found in 'Q' - the so-called 'Q' churches. But the early church moved on from this the 'real Jesus,' preferring instead the end-time world-view of John the Baptist. According to this the Christianity as we have it in our NT is a perversion, owing more to the Jewish apocalyptic of John the Baptist and the corrupting influence of Paul, the apostle, than to the so-called 'real Jesus.' The 'real Jesus' is now the 'forgotten Jesus.' Thus in discovering the 'forgotten' Jesus the JS has driven a wedge between John the Baptist and Jesus, on one hand, and Jesus and Paul, on the other. But this is outright and utterly arbitrary revisionism. This is finding a Jesus that they went looking for.

Funk is an accomplished scholar, as also are Crossan and Borg. The greater majority of the members of the JS are relatively unknown, academically speaking, and are graduates of the most liberal schools in the US. The breadth of scholarship in the UK, Europe or North America has not endorsed the radical findings of the JS.

### 3. The 'Two Faces' of Jesus

Let me speak by way of illustration to the 'two faces' of Jesus. A person has 'two faces,' or profiles. This is captured in the Hebrew word for 'face,' which is pan'im, 'faces' - plural. The person Jesus of Nazareth had two 'faces,' one he showed to the people, the other, additionally, to the Twelve, who were the new Israel in embryo.

What face did Jesus show to the people of his day ?

At Caesarea Philippi Jesus asked the Twelve, 'Who do men say that I am ?' They replied, 'John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets.' This is understandable. When the people heard him booming his message of the kingdom of God across the hillsides of Galilee, they concluded that he was a prophet. That was the public side or face of Jesus, the face of a prophet.

But there was a second 'face' which was revealed to the Twelve, but hidden from the people at large. 'But you, who do you say that I am ?' he continued. Peter replied, 'You are the Christ.' 'You are long-awaited son of David, the anointed of Yahweh, his Son.' To their insight, which he said was God-given, Jesus would add further even deeper insights, not all of them welcome

**'The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected...and be killed ... after three days rise again ... come again in the glory of his Father...'**

The Christology must be noted. In speaking of himself as Son of Man Jesus was accepting Peter's confession of Jesus as 'the Christ.' Son of Man was a messianic title at that time (see Mark 14:61-62). Furthermore, when Jesus spoke of 'his Father' (Mark 8:38) it must mean that Jesus saw himself as the Son of God. From Jesus' own lips we hear him say who he is (the Christ, the Son of God) and what will happen to him (be killed, rise the third day, come in glory). This is very close to the second main section of the Apostles' Creed, as it will be formulated in years to come. But it was the Apostles' Creed because it was first Jesus' Creed.

Here is the other 'face' of Jesus, revealed to the Twelve, but hidden from the people. To be sure, he was a man, he was a rabbi and he was a prophet. But he was also the Son of Man, the Messiah, the filial Son of God, who must die - as a ransom for many - but be raised from the dead and return in glory.

But to the people of Israel he remained just a prophet, just a rabbi, or perhaps, in more sinister tones, a false prophet, a false messiah, a charlatan. The latter, certainly, is how the Jews came to portray him in their traditions which are to be found in the Talmud.

So there were two views of Jesus at the time, a public face of a prophet or rabbi and also a private face revealed to the Twelve of the hoped-for Messiah, Son of God and Saviour. The apostles preached Jesus as he had revealed himself to be to them, as clinched by his resurrection and the coming of the Spirit to inaugurate a new age.

#### **4. The Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith**

Throughout history there have been varying responses to this preaching. Some have believed 'that' he is the Son of God and believed 'in' him. Others have rejected outright these claims. But there have been those who have been attracted to him - fascinated even - but who have not believed 'in' him. As early as late first century a certain Mara bar Serapion bracketed Jesus with Socrates and Pythagoras, though he does not mention him by name but only as 'a wise king.'

**Socrates did not die for good but lived on in the teachings of Plato.  
Pythagoras did not die for good but lived on in the statue of Hera.  
Nor did the wise king die for good, but lived on in the teaching which he had given.**

The 'wise king' was not raised from the dead, but survived - 'lived on' - only metaphorically in his teachings.

The third century Porphyry wrote

**Jesus is to be honoured as the wisest of men;  
he is not to be worshipped as God.**

During the eighteenth century the German Reimarus reached similar conclusions. The latter part of the nineteenth century witnessed a deluge of books from the Liberal theologians about Jesus as a romantic religious idealist. These were fiercely reacted against at the turn of this century by Albert Schweitzer in his *Quest of the Historical Jesus*. Schweitzer portrayed Jesus as a disillusioned apocalyptic prophet who forced the issue and brought his own life undone in Jerusalem. Martin Kähler, with greater orthodoxy, insisted that the Jesus of history was one and the 'same' as the Christ of early Christian faith, preaching and worship. Peter makes precisely this point on the Day of Pentecost when he states three times that Jesus of Nazareth who worked miracles (the Jesus of history) is 'Lord and Christ' (the Christ of faith), having been crucified, raised up from the dead and exalted (Acts 2:23, 32, 35).

The twentieth century has been dominated by Bultmann whose Lutheran view of faith as an existential leap prevented him from searching for the Jesus of history. Bultmann thought that next to nothing could be known about Jesus of Nazareth, but in any case a 'faith' which depended on 'facts' was a contradiction in terms. But that is not what Luther meant by the 'faith' that justifies the sinner. Luther meant personal trust in the saviour revealed in the historically based, historically reliable gospel.

Bultmann's reticence has been overturned with a vengeance in the so-called 'third quest' for the historical Jesus which has witnessed an outpouring of books on Jesus in the past twenty or so years. The explosion of knowledge about Jesus' world through the Dead Sea Scrolls, through Josephus studies, through Talmudic studies and through the archaeology of Jerusalem and Galilee has re-created a hitherto unknown context for Jesus the man from Nazareth.

Insofar as these studies help us to grasp who Jesus the man might have been in his times, as rabbi or prophet or revolutionary we are helped. Jesus was a man. He did show one side of his face to the world.

The doctrine of the Incarnation has always said this, though modern Jesus studies sometimes show us more clearly what he might have been like as a historical figure. Certainly he was not the flaxen haired, blue eyed figure of Sunday School halls, rather, he would have been a dark eyed, dark haired Jewish man.

However and nonetheless, it must be said that there is no consensus as to who the 'third questers' think he was or the role he might have fulfilled. There are almost as many Jesuses as there are people writing about him.

## 5. Criticism of the Jesus Seminar

There are several fatal flaws in the method used by the JS. Let me mention five.

### 5.1 The JS is selective in its use of sources.

The JS is chiefly based on two texts:

a. 'Q.' This is a hypothetical sayings source underlying Matthew and Luke (with 250 verses in all). It is called 'Q' from the German Quelle, a 'fountain' or 'spring.' 'Q' is a collection of Jesus' teachings which follows the same sequence as Mark, though 'Q' has little to say about Jesus' death or his resurrection. The JS seizes upon this as evidence of a cross-free, resurrection-free faith. But this is an argument from silence and logically precarious. Another explanation might be that 'Q' originally had sayings for Jesus' last days Jerusalem, but that Matthew nor Luke did not reproduce them because those writers preferred the material set out in Mark, their other main source.

'Q' is also said to have a low Christology, though as we shall see, this is not the case.

b. The Gospel of Thomas, the Second Century, Egyptian, Gnostic document which was known in the early centuries but which was not then regarded as genuinely part of the documentation of early Christianity. It is patently a collage of various parts of the NT as well as dreamy Gnostic sayings. Astonishingly, the Gospel of Thomas or alleged underlying sources of Thomas is dated by JS with the earliest sources of the synoptic tradition. Few scholars support this view.

At the same time the JS has virtually ignored the Gospel of Mark which, with 'Q,' is the other major building block for Matthew and Luke. Mark, of course, has a high christology (for example, the Son of Man who inaugurates the Kingdom of God by his death and resurrection) and teems with eyewitness detail (for example, Jesus asleep on a cushion in a boat crossing the lake, along with other boats). Yet Mark has effectively been left out of account because its portrait of Jesus does not fit within the frame predetermined by Robert Funk. Only one sentence from the entire Gospel of Mark is deemed worthy of 'red letter' treatment, 'Pay the emperor what belongs to the emperor, and God what belongs to God.' Astonishingly, no other saying in the whole of Mark is considered authentic by the JS.

The JS disregards the unanimous opinion of 2nd century church fathers that there were four authentic gospels. Four not five. Furthermore, our earliest references to the gospels has each gospel headed editorially with the word kata, 'according to,' followed by the name of the author of that gospel. There is one gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ - but it is that gospel 'according to Matthew,' that gospel 'according to Mark,' that gospel 'according to Luke' and that gospel 'according to John.' A second century father, Tatian, compiled the first so-called 'harmony' of the gospels. He amalgamated the four gospels into one and it was called diatessaron, dia ('through') tessaron ('four') gospels.<sup>2</sup> There were and are four gospels, not five according to the JS.

Sound historical method uses all the sources that are available and relevant, prudently weighed as to their quality. But the JS uses 'Q' and the late and dubious Gospel of Thomas while virtually ignoring the Gospel of Mark.

5.2 Because it is selective the JS is necessarily inconsistent.

This is evident in at least two instances. First, the JS relies on 'Q' but not the Gospel of Mark which is also reproduced in Matthew and Luke and must, like 'Q' predate those gospels. The Gospel of Mark must be at least as early as 'Q' so why does the JS use the one, but not the other ? This is inconsistent.

Secondly, the JS depends on 'Q' but discards Matthew and Luke where 'Q' is discovered. The JS is inconsistent in depending on 'Q' while rejecting the only documents where 'Q' is to be found, the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Does the JS two thousand years later know better than Matthew and Luke.

Such inconsistency has no place in genuine historical research and inevitably attracts the accusation of bias.

5.3 The JS is arbitrary.

This is seen in the use of the so-called criterion of dissimilarity. By this criterion a saying of Jesus is judged authentic only when it is dissimilar. 'Dissimilar to what ?' you ask. Dissimilar to two things - antecedent Jewish tradition on one hand, and subsequent Christian tradition, on the other. In other words this criterion arbitrarily demands that Jesus cannot have spoken as a man in the religious tradition of Second Temple Judaism. Likewise it demands that we must remain agnostic about any later church teaching found from Jesus' lips because it may have been read back to Jesus from the liturgical or credal life of the early church. Thus Jesus did say 'Love your enemies' because that was not current Jewish teaching, but he may not have said, 'take, eat, this is my body,' because this arises out of the liturgical tradition of the early church.

By this criterion of dissimilarity the JS automatically eliminates 82 % of Jesus sayings in the gospels because they are either too Jewish or too Christian. What foolishness this is. It demands, first, that Jesus was not a Jewish man who had a real life context in the Judaism of that time, and second, that his teachings did not shape the movement that he founded. Inevitably it issues in a Jesus who is a kind of 'free-floating iconoclast, artificially isolated from' the Jews 'and their Scriptures and artificially isolated from the movement he founded' (R.B. Hays, 'The Corrected Jesus,' 4).

Several other examples of arbitrariness may be given.

One is that the JS turns a blind eye to the so-called 'bolt from the Johannine blue' in which Jesus claims to be the Son who alone makes the Father known. And where is this great statement by Jesus about himself to be found ? Remarkably, in 'Q' (Matthew 11:25-27/Luke 10:21-22).

Another example appears earlier when John the Baptist sent the question to Jesus, 'are you he that is to come ?' We not Jesus' answer.

Go tell John what you hear and see. The blind receive their sight and lame walk. Lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear. The dead are raised up and the poor have the good news preached to them.

These words echo Isaiah 35, a passage about the Messiah, that promises 'your God will come...to save you.' In effect Jesus is claiming to be God's messianic messenger, in whom God had 'come.' Where is this passage found ? Again, in 'Q' (Matthew 11:2-6; Luke 7:18-23).

Here are two passages which express the highest of high christology and and they are found in 'Q.' But they are arbitrarily ignored.

This arbitrariness leads into a fourth error, circularity.

5.4 The JS is guilty of circularity.

In a recent meeting in Sydney I heard Dr Funk argue that the JS was committed to scholarship. But in the same breath it was clear that he approached the whole JS enterprise as a disillusioned Christian, one who had essentially given up on anything resembling orthodoxy. The churches are tired, the seminaries are tired and university departments of theology are tired and the academic journals are tired. Funk confessed he was looking for something new, a new Jesus, not the tired 'old' Jesus, but the 'real' Jesus. He confessed that he was looking for an inclusive Jesus who would be right for our pluralistic times.

When Funk set out on his odyssey he knew what he did not want to find, the 'Jesus' of orthodoxy, the 'Christ of faith.' Inevitably, therefore, he found what he was looking for. Rather like a Royal Commission with such narrow terms of reference that only certain conclusions could be reached. Funk and the JS are trapped within their own loop, hemmed in by their own circularity.

And yet their Jesus is not 'new,' not the 'real' Jesus. This Jesus never was, except in the imagination of the JS. He is not even the Jesus of the single face, such as the people of Jesus' own day saw, the face of a prophet or a rabbi.

The 'real' Jesus is not 'forgotten,' but is recoverable through the pages of the gospels. He is the Jesus who did impact on the populace of Galilee as a powerful prophet and on the Jerusalem scribes as a powerful disputer from the north. But there was another 'face,' the face of 'great David's greater son,' the 'Son of Man' who is the 'Son of God,' who is the shepherd of the 'lost' and the 'friend of sinners' and their saviour. The Jews at large were not shown that face, only the Twelve. This face as revealed to the Twelve lives on in the faith, teaching and worship of the apostles and the early church, becoming the faith, teaching and worship of the church 'catholic.'

#### 5.5 The JS fails to understand the dynamics of history.

The JS fails to ask and answer fundamental questions. For example, why was Jesus of Nazareth crucified? The Romans reserved crucifixion as a severe punishment for and deterrent to revolutionaries and insurgents. A self-styled Messiah of the Jews, or one that could be cast in that role, was certainly exactly the kind of person the Romans would crucify. It must be regarded as a secure fact of history that Jesus was crucified under the titulus which stated the crime for which he was charged, KING OF THE JEWS. So how do we get from a Jesus who is a benign teller of enigmatic parables to one accused as Messiah and crucified for that capital crime? This is a problem for all versions of Jesus as the 'pale Galilean' of liberal theology spanning from Reimarus to the JS.

A second example of failure to understand the dynamics of history relates to the rise of earliest Christianity. Here the writings of Paul are very important. Several of Paul's letters - Galatians and 1 and 2 Thessalonians - can be dated pre-50, that is, twenty years or less on from Jesus. Furthermore, the historical information they contain is gratuitously rather than intentionally conveyed. From these earliest letters the following emerges:

First, Paul persecuted 'the church of God' and 'attempted to destroy the faith' (Galatians 1:12,23). On his return to Jerusalem within three years of his conversion as an apostle of Christ he met the 'apostles' Peter and James (1:19). Soon afterwards Paul himself was forced to leave Judaea. In other words, 'the church of God' and 'the faith' and 'the apostles' were already in place before Paul's persecutions. Paul did not invent these things as liberals claim, for he attempted to destroy them.

Second, as to when did these persecutions of Saul of Tarsus in Jerusalem occur red straightforward calculations indicates that they occurred no later than one or at most two years after the crucifixion. The book of Acts entirely supports the sequence in Paul's letters: the apostles, the church, the faith, Saul's persecutions, his conversion, his return from Damascus to Jerusalem, his own forced withdrawal from Judaea.

All of this this raises the question, what launched 'the church of God' and 'the faith,' both of which were so offensive that Saul sought to destroy them? Remember that these were launched within months of Jesus, in all probability, back-to-back with him, as the book of Acts clearly teaches. The answer, of course, is that it must have been someone very like the figure we find in the pages of the four gospels. The feeble mystic of the JS could never launch the kind of movement earliest Christianity immediately became.

The so-called 'real' Jesus of the JS is a religious wimp, who would never have been crucified as 'king of the Jews' nor be the catalyst for a movement that the zealot Saul attempted to destroy, which subsequently changed the course of history. The JS fails completely to understand the dynamics of history.

## **6. Conclusion**

My understanding is that Dr Funk and many of his colleagues are reacting against US protestant fundamentalism, with its extreme pre-millennial eschatology and insensitivity to social injustice to blacks and other minority groups. I am told that the eschatology of many American protestants is the reason some members of the JS are looking for a non-apocalyptic Jesus, an enigmatic sage rather than a doomsday preacher.

If this is correct I think there is a danger in doing theology by reaction. In that case they have reacted to one fundamentalism by another fundamentalism, in the case the fundamentalism of the 'new liberalism' like that espoused by John Spong and others in the US episcopal church, which has now rejected every tenet of the Christian creeds.

As Christians we are called to stand within a circle called 'orthodoxy,' what Ignatius in the early second century called the 'catholic faith.' That is the faith of the 'whole' church, what the church at all times and in all places has believed. That is what 'catholic' means, 'according to the whole,' kath' holike. It was a word devised to protect true believers from the sectional and schismatic heresy of gnosticism in the Second Century. Well there are new heresies abroad, and the findings of the JS are among them.

Blind dogmatism is no answer to heresy; it never has been. The sanctified mind applied to the Holy Scriptures, seeking to understand, but also to reply to that which is untrue to God, is the path to tread. Orthodoxy in liberality.

There is only One Jesus, who is the same yesterday, today and forever. He is the Son of God - perfect God and perfect man - who taught us the way of God, who died for our forgiveness and who was raised to give us hope in the face of death and he will come again in a second advent. This is he and there is no other. We believe 'in' him.