



## Is the New Quest Docetic?

By Paul J. Achtemeier

The past ten years have witnessed, especially within German New Testament scholarship, the growth of a renewed "quest of the historical Jesus." Since many have been nursed on the idea that such a quest is both historically impossible and theologically illegitimate, it is well to look at the direction this renewed quest is taking, so that some evaluation of it may be attempted. Before it can be evaluated properly, however, something must be understood of the development of that course of New Testament scholarship which made the present quest inevitable.

### I

It would be fair to say that the present quest grows directly out of problems spawned by the first quest, which dominated the nineteenth century. The failure of that first quest became apparent with the dawning realization that the literary sources available for this endeavor, the Synoptic Gospels, were not adequate for reconstructing the life of Jesus as he "really lived it." It was the resulting search for new methods of using the available sources in an effort to find the historical Jesus that gave rise to the movement now called "form criticism" (*Formgeschichte*).<sup>1</sup> This movement was an attempt to by-pass the present structure of the Synoptics, and primarily Mark, in an effort to get at the earlier, probably oral, stages of the tradition about Jesus. That the goal was still some sort of life of Jesus is clear when we consider the fact that Karl Ludwig Schmidt, in his study concerning the framework of the history of Jesus (*Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu*), at the same time that he denies the validity of the Marcan narrative framework nevertheless offers conjectures as to where a given pericope, freed from its present context, might reasonably be fitted into the life of the Jesus of history. Thus, at least in its beginnings, the form-critical movement still hoped to produce something like a life of Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Schniewind, "Zur Synoptiker-Exegese" in *Theologische Rundschau*, Vol. II, No. 3, 1930, p. 161.



Further analysis of the material, however, forced upon scholars the conclusion that it was impossible to disentangle history from faith in the oral traditions, since the purpose of these traditions had from the beginning been conversion, not historical record. That is, New Testament scholars came to recognize that the traditions contained within the Synoptic Gospels are essentially sermonic, or kerygmatic. Thus, it was the early Church which, in its diverse we have to do in the Gospels not with historical reports, nor even with material that could become sources for "scientific" historical knowledge. Rather, the

Gospels embody the traditions of the early Church about Jesus. This means that we must concern ourselves with these traditions, with this kerygma, and must abandon any hope of getting behind this kerygma to the historical Jesus. It became axiomatic in New Testament circles that the task of synoptic research exhausted itself in reproducing the kerygma.<sup>2</sup>

A further question was now raised, this time theological. What significance did the fact that the Church produced kerygma, not historical report, have for our understanding of how the Church understood God's revelation in Christ? A conclusion immediately suggested itself: the primitive Church must have felt that this revelation took place in the preaching of this kerygma. In the *account* of the words and deeds of Jesus, God revealed himself anew to the hearers. It is in the sermon, therefore, that God comes to meet man. In the kerygma, the power of the risen Christ is transmitted.

This meant, in turn, that the significance of the Gospels was to be sought in the reports themselves, not in the events that lie behind the reports. The significance, in short, lies in what the reports communicated to the people who heard them. That is the theological conclusion which form-critical views of the sources made apparent.

Here again, a problem arises. The kerygma was formed for first-century men. The kerygma was intended to meet those men where they were, and to pass on to them the message of Christ's power, a power which was at work in the proclaiming and hearing of that message. If, however, the power lies in that proclamation, that kerygma, how can it mean anything to twentieth century man, for

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133; cf. also pp. 158, 180.



whom the thought-forms used to transmit God's power are confusing, if not meaningless? The answer is obvious: the kerygma must be recast into terms understandable to twentieth century man. With this solution, the movement named "demythologizing the New Testament" was born. Demythologizing means simply recasting the kerygmatic truths about human existence as existence under God in terms that modern man can accept and understand, so that these existential truths, contained in the kerygma, may come forth in all their God-revealing power. Rudolf Bultmann, who initiated this movement, argues that when Christ is witnessed to as God's revelation, that witness becomes God's revelation for man in that instant. That is, this message enables man to see his life as a life under God. Thus, as God's revelation, this message frees a man from a false understanding of his self and his existence, which has bound him to the past, and thus makes him open to face a future of life under God. In such terms, Bultmann attempts to recast the understanding of existence contained in mythic garb within the kerygma into terms that are comprehensible to twentieth century man.

Once again, however, a new problem appears. Myth, as Bultmann uses the term, means simply descriptions of the gods in terms of human activity. It means "objectifying" divine acts by speaking of them as though they were accessible to sensory perception, as are other events in the causal chain of the natural world. This view, in terms of which the kerygma is cast, argues Bultmann, modern science has rendered untenable. But here the problem: what if the kerygma is pure myth, with no non-mythic remnant? Suppose the very event to which the kerygma refers in mythic language were itself purely mythical? What validity would there then be to that existential self-understanding contained therein? Would it not then share the validity, and the invalidity, of any ancient myth? Put in terms of the message of the kerygma, this question is: what is the relationship between the Christ proclaimed in mythical terms in the kerygma, to the Jesus who walked the hills of Galilee? Put in terms of the movement of demythologizing, out of which it grew, the question is: is the understanding of existence implied in the kerygma compatible with the understanding of existence implied in the utterances and acts of Jesus, to the extent that they are recoverable? To ask this question is to ask whether or not the Christian faith has any necessary relationship with certain particular, concrete histori-



cal events. And this is precisely the question that the renewed quest of the historical Jesus is asking. In doing this, it is simply carrying one step forward the movement which gave rise to demythologizing. just as working with the Gospel sources led to the discovery of the kerygma, so working with the kerygma has forced scholars to recognize that the kerygma understands itself basically in terms of specific historical events.

There is ample evidence in the New Testament that the Christian faith does understand itself in terms of its historical roots. The earliest confession of faith found in the New Testament, "Jesus is Lord" (cf. I Cor. 12: 3, Acts 2: 36), points to the identification of the risen glorious Lord with Jesus of Nazareth, a historical person. This same identification is evident in the name "Jesus Christ" itself. Fragments of other early confessions, embedded in the New Testament literature (e.g., I Tim. 3: 16, probably also Phil. 2: 6-11) contain, in addition to their emphases on the risen and glorious Lord, clear reference to that Lord's historical existence.

The fact that the Christian faith from its earliest times has understood itself in terms of its roots in historical reality means that the necessity for historical research into the traditions regarding Jesus of Nazareth is given in the nature of the faith itself.<sup>3</sup> If the New Testament is correct in saying that God does work in history, and specifically in the Word made flesh as historical existence, then we must constantly ask whether or not the object of our faith *now* has any relation to God's historic act in Christ *then*. If we are content to worship a myth, and are willing to allow the Christian faith to be formed by human fantasy, then such a quest may be safely abandoned. If, however, we take seriously the Bible's claim, Old and New Testaments alike, that God is a God who acts within history, then it cannot be theologically illegitimate to ask questions about the relationship of our faith to historical reality. We must ask whether the Christ we worship is the Christ to

whom the New Testament points as historic reality, not a theological myth: that is the necessity of the renewed quest of the historical Jesus.

The new quest, however, faces a difficulty in relation to available sources which the old quest did not. It is no longer regarded

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<sup>3</sup> W. G. Kuemmel "Das Problem der geschichtlichen Jesus in der gegenwaertigen Forsch-ungslage" in *Der Historische Jesus und der Kerygmatische Christus* (hereafter referred to as *His. Jesus*), Evangelische Verlagsanstalt Berlin, 1961, ed. H. Ristow and K. Matthiae, p. 49; cf. also in the same volume J. Hromadka, "Zur Frage des historischen Jesus und des keryg-matischen Christus," p. 117.



as possible to disentangle valid history from dogmatic coloring by means of some formula or principle. Because the Church is responsible for the total tradition, we must reckon with the possibility that that community of faith left its creative imprint on all of the material it handed on.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the renewed quest must be satisfied with a much more modest goal than that which the first quest allowed itself. The renewed quest must be content simply to locate certain indications of Jesus' own existential self-understanding, in order to ascertain whether the existential self-understanding represented in the kerygma is a legitimate development of it. We must simply inquire, in short, if the existential self-understanding implied by the kerygma has its roots in the existential self-understanding of Jesus of Nazareth. The result will then be simply a "Yes" or a "no" to that question. Those who look forward to new attempts at a biography of Jesus will be saddened at such news, but the fact is that the renewed quest is very restricted in its goals.

Even this modest goal, however, has its fundamental problem. Is there any material in the Gospel tradition which we may assume has remained unaffected by the theology of the transmitting group, the employment of which will let us reach legitimate conclusions concerning Jesus' own existential self-understanding?

The answer to this methodological question has been "yes" on the part of those men engaged in the new quest, although they do not always agree on what that material is. Hans Conzelmann argues that the parables represent such material, since they contain a message that is unalterably connected with the actual presence of the one telling them, namely, Jesus himself. Thus, they cannot be the construction of the transmitting Church. These parables contain an indirect christology in that their intention and meaning is that the hearer of the parable is immediately confronted with God. Thus, Conzelmann affirms, we can say that Jesus understands himself as the accomplishment of this direct confrontation. With Jesus' death and resurrection, however, the indirect christology implied in the parables had to be changed into a direct christology which still, nonetheless, maintained that in Jesus men are confronted by God. Thus, the direct christology apparent in the kerygma has as its necessary presupposition the indirect

christology of the sayings of the earthly Jesus. Therefore, Conzelmann is able to affirm that the

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. W. G. Kuemmel, *op. cit.*, p. 51.



kerygma does have a necessary relationship to the earthly Jesus, and the kerygma cannot therefore be dismissed as purely mythical.<sup>5</sup>

Ernst Fuchs, on the other hand, arrives at much the same conclusion but by means of a different route. Fuchs begins with the acknowledgment that the sayings of Jesus in the Gospels are dogmatically colored; therefore, rather than looking to Jesus' sayings, or to the titles applied to him, we must observe his actions. These actions are those of one who dares to act for God by receiving sinners. That is to say, Jesus, by acting in the place of God when he receives sinners, forces those around him to a decision as to whether or not he may legitimately do this. This same kind of decision we can then see required also in his sayings. Thus, Jesus represented a call to decision, which, Fuchs argues, we can only understand if we see it in the light of a decision Jesus himself made. That decision centered on taking seriously God's grace as God's true will for man, even though that would involve suffering. Jesus' decision was the decision to answer "yes" to the question: Does God want us to appeal to him despite our justified fear of his judgment? This is the decision the earthly Jesus made, but it is also the decision that the preaching about Jesus demands. The difference is that in the kerygma this decision is demanded in terms of the risen Jesus. The proclamation of the risen Jesus therefore puts the hearer before the same decision Jesus himself faced: is God's true will for me grace? Thus, in the preaching about Jesus (kerygma) we are confronted with the same decision that Jesus himself demanded in his preaching and acts, which in turn was based on his own personal decision. Therefore, the kerygma does have its roots in Jesus' own existential self-understanding.<sup>6</sup>

## II

The answer to the question posed in the renewed quest—does the understanding of existence implied in the kerygma presuppose and reflect the understanding of existence displayed by Jesus of Nazareth?—is therefore an affirmative one. In this sense, at least, the continuity between the historical Jesus and the kerygmatic Christ is affirmed, and the kerygma is seen to be something other than pure

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<sup>5</sup> "Zur Methode der Leben-jesu-Forschung" in *Zeitschrift fuer Theologie und Kirche* (hereafter referred to as *ZThK*), Beiheft 1, 1959, pp. 2-13.

<sup>6</sup> *Zur Frage nach dem Historischen Jesus*, Tuebingen: JCB Mohr, 1960, pp. 143-167.



myth. The kerygma does have as its necessary presupposition the historical Jesus.

To this limited extent, therefore, the renewed quest for the historical Jesus has arrived at a positive result. It has, furthermore, arrived at this result in a way that displays certain striking unanimities of presupposition and conclusion among the majority of the scholars engaged in this endeavor. Whether this is due to the fact that those who have initiated the renewed quest are students of Rudolf Bultmann may be allowed to remain an open question. It cannot be denied, however, that there are certain unanimities both in method and result within this renewed quest.

First, and perhaps here is the reason for all other agreement, there is an unanimity among the current practitioners that the form-critical method with its presuppositions concerning the nature of the transmitting community, and therefore the nature of the Gospels, is the only legitimate method on the basis of which to proceed. One scholar some years ago complained to a group of fellow Germans that non-German scholars do not accept the "self-evident presupposition of the form-critical method." <sup>7</sup> This means, of course, that these scholars see themselves within the context of the historical movement, sketched above, which has culminated in the current problem. It may one day become evident that the form-critical presuppositions cannot be taken as "self-evident"; that is not yet the case in the renewed quest. <sup>8</sup>

Second, there is a general agreement that the most fruitful place to begin in an attempt to recover the thrust of the preaching of the earthly Jesus is the parables. Current New Testament scholarship has reached the conclusion that the parables, divested of the accretions added by the transmitting community-accretions designed to make the parable applicable to new situations-cannot be understood apart from the one who told them. Therefore, it is concluded, the parables demand for their understanding the physical presence of Jesus. Otherwise they do not make sense. Even Fuchs, who centers his quest on the actions of Jesus, reaches that conclusion through an analysis of the parable of the prodigal son, which, he finds, forces

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<sup>7</sup> H. Conzelmann, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> O. Cullmann has tried to indicate that the present conclusions are not the only possible ones to be drawn from form-critical presuppositions, but he does not challenge those presuppositions in any thoroughgoing way. Cf. "Out of Season Remarks on the 'Historical Jesus' of the Bultmann School" in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, Vol. 16, No. 2, January, 1961, pp. 131 ff. This same article appears in German in *His. Jesus*, pp. 266 ff.



one to conclude that the parables are simply commentaries on the way Jesus himself acts. However they may be used, most scholars would agree with Conzelmann that the basic material in the parables is to be regarded as authentic.<sup>9</sup>

Again, there is general, and perhaps to some, knowing that these men are students of Bultmann, surprising agreement that it is possible to demonstrate, within the scholarly presuppositions accepted, that the kerygma does have its roots in the historical Jesus. That is to say, it is generally agreed that in order to make sense the kerygma demands as its presupposition the activity of the earthly, "pre-Easter" Jesus. Thus, there is general unanimity that the answer to the question: Does the kerygma presume some historical reality? is "yes."

A fourth area of agreement concerns the nature and meaning of faith, and the place it must play in the renewed quest. These scholars are very much aware of the fact that one of the motivations, at least, of the first quest of the historical Jesus, was the desire to be rid of the necessity of faith. The incredible elements which tradition had attached to Jesus were to be stripped away, and the Jesus who emerged would then, so the nineteenth century thought, be accessible to historical sight, not religious faith. The view of sources under which the renewed quest operates will not allow any such illusions. These men are quite aware that one cannot disentangle faith from historical fact within the sources. The renewed quest is unanimous in the conviction that knowledge of the historical Jesus cannot, indeed dare not, destroy the necessity for faith. In fact, the definition of faith which is here presumed, openly or covertly, allows no room whatsoever for any historical fact that could act as a prop for faith, or that could relieve the necessity within faith for constantly renewed decision to believe. The sharpest scorn of these men is reserved for those simple, and not so simple, people who take archeological confirmation of Biblical evidence as a "basis for" or "proof of" the validity of Biblical faith.<sup>10</sup>

Such a view of faith, drawing its roots from the Kierkegaardian position that the results of historical research dare not become determinative for faith in eternal God, protects itself from being faith in historic events rather than faith in God, yet this very emphasis

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<sup>9</sup> H. Conzelmann, *op. cit.*, p. 9; E. Fuchs, *op. cit.*, pp. 153 ff.

<sup>10</sup> E.g., H. Conzelmann, *op. cit.*, p. 8.



contains within itself the thrust which ultimately and, it seems, inevitably must render the Christian faith docetic.

Again and again, the men engaged in the renewed quest define faith in such a way that it cannot possibly have any basis in historic fact. Fuchs argues that we must affirm that neither the crucifixion nor the resurrection really concerns faith except in so far as they force faith to consider that which is truly appropriate to it.<sup>11</sup> G. Ebeling maintains that

faith in Jesus really means faith in Jesus as the witness to faith, and in that sense he then becomes the basis for our faith.<sup>12</sup> In these and other attempts to define faith, the point emerges that true faith can in no way rest on concrete historic events.

In fact, these men go so far as to affirm that pure faith is not concerned with any content at all. One scholar has stated that in faith, as contrasted to thinking, content plays no part. Rather, faith is concerned with the freedom to have faith.<sup>13</sup> Carried to its conclusion, this means that the New Testament itself is a concession to failing faith. This is then carried to the absurd, if consistent conclusion, that had Jesus himself lived longer, he himself would have been subjected to the same difficulty of keeping his own faith pure.<sup>14</sup> Faith, in short, can legitimately concern itself only with its own act of faith.

Such a view of faith, however, is rendered necessary by the view of revelation that underlies it. Revelation for this theological frame-Work does not occur in historic events, but in the report of these events, that is, in the kerygma. Ebeling has argued that revelation is not a historical factum, it is not found as a historical occurrence; rather, it occurs at all times where the kerygma is proclaimed.<sup>15</sup> It is in the event of faithful hearing that revelation takes place. Thus, the basic problem can be formulated in this way: How can ancient speech about God, which intends to be revelation, really reach me as a modern man?<sup>16</sup> Here it comes clear: revelation is the report, the words, the proclamation, rather than the historic events. This can be extended to the consequent conclusion that the question con-

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. E. Fuchs, "Jesus und der Glaube" in *ZThK*, Vol. 55, 1958, P. 171; cf. also by the same author: "Was wird in der Exegese des neuen Testaments Interpretiert" in *ZThK*, Beiheft I, P. 45.

<sup>12</sup> G. Ebeling, "Die Frage nach dem historischen Jesus und das Problem der Christologie" in *ZThK*, Beiheft I P. 28.

<sup>13</sup> E. Fuchs, "Was wird in der Exegese *ZThK*, Beiheft 1, P. 45.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>15</sup> Reported in J. Jeremias, "Der gegenwaertige Stand der Debatte um das Problem des historischen Jesus" in *His. Jesus*, P. 17.

<sup>16</sup> H. Braun, "Die Heilstatsachen im neuen Testament," *ZThK*, Vol. 57, p. 42.



cerning the historical Jesus becomes, by its very nature, a question concerning the reality of the confrontation with God in the sermon.<sup>17</sup>

That such a view of faith has little to do with the New Testament meaning of that term becomes clear when we examine the way in which certain passages are interpreted. Let one example suffice. In dealing with Paul's statement in Romans 10: 9-"if you believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead"-Fuchs affirms that this means faith is "faith in a dramatic announcement of Jesus' resurrection from the dead by God."<sup>18</sup> Is Now this is evidently not what Paul means. It is clear in Paul that our faith is not in the *announcement* of the *risen Christ*, but in the *risen Christ* himself. What else could Paul

mean when he writes to the Corinthians: "if Christ be not risen from the dead, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain," except that faith depends, not on the announcement, but on the *fact* that Christ rose from the dead? It does little good to be told by the same author that Paul has here "got off the track" in his argument.<sup>19</sup> Paul has if faith has no integral relation to historical acts, but for Paul, as for the rest of the New Testament, the content of faith is precisely the fact that God has acted decisively in certain historic events.

This view of faith, then, based on the idea that God reveals himself in reports, not acts, contains within itself, as J. Jeremias has observed, the danger of lapsing into docetism by emphasizing the *idea* of Christ, rather than *Jesus* Christ.<sup>20</sup> We have, in short, the anomalous fact that the new quest of the historical Jesus is being carried on by a group of men who would have to regard any valid historical fact about Jesus of Nazareth as threatening the purity of the Christian faith. That the renewed search is carried on within a perspective that contains such a strange contradiction would seem to indicate that the movement, as now conceived, can hardly reach conclusive results.

One point, however, can be served by this renewed quest. That is simply the fact that we must recognize that the Christian faith does in truth stand or fall with certain historic events. We must be willing to take the incarnation seriously enough to understand that by this act, God did in fact commit himself at one point to ac-

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<sup>17</sup> E. Fuchs, *Zur Frage nach dem his. Jesus*, p. 166; cf. also by same author "Was wird in der Exegese .... " *ZThK*, Beiheft I, p. 42.

<sup>18</sup> E. Fuchs, *Zur Frage nach dem his. Jesus*, p. 145.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>20</sup> J. Jeremias, *op. cit.*, p. 18.



tivity on human terms within human history. God in Christ did become "true man." If he did not, then the Christian faith is, as Paul affirms, empty and meaningless. That the Christian faith thus understands itself is evident in the fact that Gospels were produced. J. Schniewind has pointed out that it would be natural for the early Church to collect the sayings of Jesus, since this was rabbinic custom, and had as a precedent the Old Testament book of Proverbs. What is not self-evident is that they should have recorded Jesus' acts as well. This must mean, as Schniewind points out, that the early Church saw significance in what Jesus *did* in history, not simply in what he said.<sup>21</sup> It is just this point, of course, that finds emphasis in Paul, and that has dictated the form of the Gospel of Mark, where all leads up to the decisive act of the cross.

Here it would seem, we find confirmation for the fact that what did happen in history is of decisive significance for the Christian faith, and that therefore the Christian faith by its nature must continually inquire into the nature of history, and of that particular history

referred to in the Gospels. That is not to say that the Christian faith depends for its validity on historical research; such research can never validate the truth of the affirmation that in Christ, God was acting to reconcile the world to himself. But neither does this mean that we must affirm Lessing's famous dictum (that accidental truths of history can never become proofs of the eternally valid truths of reason) in a religious sense, namely, that accidental historical events can never become the grounds of a valid Christian faith. One cannot escape the impression that the ghost of Lessing peers out from between the lines of the contemporary quest, and that is true despite the witness of the New Testament that faith stands or falls with certain particular historic events.<sup>22</sup>

### III

In sum, then, the renewed quest, as it has thus far developed, is being carried on by a group whose theological presuppositions limit their quest to ascertaining whether or not the understanding of existence they find in the kerygma is based upon, and necessarily pre-

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<sup>21</sup> J. Schniewind, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

<sup>22</sup> Compare in this sense the manner in which R. Bultmann eliminates the significance of history by making perception of the Christ-event the end of history, and by making Christian eschatology radically individualistic, so that the historical content becomes unimportant for such a personal event, in "History and Eschatology in the New Testament" in *New Testament Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, September, 1954, pp. 5 ff.



supposes, the understanding of existence that motivated Jesus' deeds and words. It is, therefore, essentially a question of Jesus' own self-consciousness, as these men readily affirm.<sup>23</sup> With this is coupled a view of faith which denies for faith any ultimate significance in "accidental historical truths," and which finds the enduring significance of Jesus of Nazareth in the preaching about him, the hearing of which opens for the hearer the possibility of authentic existence.

That this view results in a kind of docetic view of the historical Jesus we have attempted to indicate. Yet whatever we may want to say about the theological legitimacy of the renewed quest in its present form, we may not deny the theological necessity of the quest in some form. In fact, it is the theological necessity of the quest of the historical Jesus that most clearly indicates the questionable nature of the current quest. That quest must be carried on under the New Testament axiom that gives it birth: the fact, namely, that there are certain historical events connected with the life of Jesus to which faith simply cannot be indifferent and from which it cannot be independent.<sup>24</sup> Lessing's famous axiom must be restated: *only* accidental truths of history can be the basis for the eternal truth of faith. In such restatement, the necessity of the quest is given. The Christian faith is founded upon historic reality, not intellectual formulations, and this fact at once renders a

quest of the historical Jesus inevitable, and renders the present form of that quest, with its docetic thrust, less than satisfactory.

Put in the vocabulary of current New Testament scholarship, we must affirm that the question of the relationship of the historic Jesus to the kerygma is of vital importance. This, as we have tried to indicate, is given in the very nature of the kerygma, and it is precisely at this point, it would seem, that we can come to grips with a basic problem into which New Testament scholarship, on the basis of form-critical presuppositions, has gotten itself. According to these presuppositions, the Church is a creative agent in the transmitting of the tradition, an agent which not only alters, but on occasion also creates new traditions about Jesus of Nazareth. It is just such views, as we have tried to indicate, that lead to a docetic view of Christ. Yet such a picture of the Church is not the picture one necessarily gets from the New Testament.

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<sup>23</sup> H. Conzelmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 4, 10; E. Fuchs, "Was wird in der Exegese...." p. 44.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. H. Gollwitzer, "Der Glaube an Jesus Christus und der sogenannte historische Jesus" in *His. Jesus*, p. 111; cf. also J. Schniewind, *op. cit.*, pp. 181-182.



The unavoidable impression of the Church gathered from the New Testament Epistles, especially those of Paul, is best described in terms of the necessity of the Church to be faithful to God's revelation in Jesus of Nazareth. This faithfulness means that God's act in the historic Jesus must be determinative for the form of the Church's existence: it must be willing to suffer in adversity (I Pet. 3-4); it must be willing to give of itself to those in need (I Cor. 8: 3 ff.); it must conform its life to the life of that Jesus of Nazareth (Eph. 4: 17 ff.). It is, furthermore, hardly accidental that the Lord's supper, grounded as it is in the context of Jesus' historical passion, came to occupy the center of the Church's cultic life, as the word about Jesus who lived, died, and rose again became the center both of proclamation and ethical exhortation. It was this necessity to be faithful to Jesus of Nazareth that caused the Church to collect traditions into running narratives, something unexpected either in terms of the community's eschatological outlook or the surrounding Jewish cultus. The Church obviously felt itself compelled to frame its life in terms of the life of the historic Jesus.

This same theological necessity to be faithful to that life also finds expression in the structure of the Gospel of Mark. Much that finds a place in the Marcan narrative is, within its present context, difficult if not contradictory. For example, there are occasions reported when one gets the impression that the disciples understand what is happening about them, and who Jesus is (cf. the confession at Caesarea Philippi or the transfiguration); yet at other times they are inexplicably confused on this very point (cf. 4: 40, 9: 2, etc.). How, again, are we to explain the fact that even after the disciples have witnessed the feeding of the 5,000, they repeat an almost identical question before the feeding of the 4,000 which, according to Mark, occurs only a short time later (6: 37 and

8: 4)? It becomes plain that Mark is using materials that were not developed to fit his arrangement; that is, he is using independent traditions within his Gospel framework. Yet the startling fact is this: Mark makes no attempt to alter these traditions to eliminate the difficulties. To say that one who could create a new literary *genre* was too thick to notice his own discrepancies is not a satisfactory explanation. The conclusion here suggested is similar to that noted above: Mark operated under the impulse to be faithful to the historic life of Jesus as that life was represented in the traditions of which he made use.



Similar observations can be made concerning the parables. Scholars have pointed out that in some instances the point of a parable has been altered in the tradition.<sup>25</sup> Yet the very fact that the Church preferred to use a parable spoken by Jesus to meet a new situation in the Church's life again points to the inherent drive within the Church to frame its life in the light of the historic Jesus.

If, then, the Church thus felt itself under the necessity of being faithful to God's historic act in Jesus, it seems difficult to attribute to that same Church a desire to create wholly new materials about Jesus, a desire which would run directly counter to the faithfulness it felt itself required to exhibit.

It must be affirmed, however, that such a view of the early Church, however appealing it may be, cannot simply be assumed because it is theologically preferable to some other point of view. The chief consideration must be: what view of the earliest Church best accounts for the present shape of its written traditions, and the oral traditions underlying them? Yet it would seem that this question can only be answered fairly by taking into account the total traditions of the early Church, i.e., Epistles as well as Gospels. This total tradition points to the fact that the Church measured its existence in terms of its faithfulness to the historical life of Jesus of Nazareth. Only within a view of the early Church that allows these facts to come forth can the sources receive adequate evaluation, and the early Church be correctly understood. It would be fair to say that the future of a theologically and historically legitimate quest of the historical Jesus depends upon the success with which the view of the Church inherent in the total New Testament kerygma can be delineated.

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<sup>25</sup> Cf., eg, J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, trans. SH Hooke. New York: Scribner, 1955.