WHY STUDY THE HISTORICAL JESUS?

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This article is a companion piece to my article on “The Quest of the Unhistorical Jesus and the Quest of the Historical Jesus.” In both quests the results were mixed. The driving factor of the quest of the unhistorical Jesus is summed up by the Reformer, Philip Melanchthon: “[T]o know Christ means to know his benefits… For unless you know why Christ put on flesh and was nailed to the cross, what good will it do you to know merely the history about him?”¹ The downside is that orthodoxy moved increasingly on a trajectory away from the historical Jesus in pursuit of “christology from above.” All too often the quest of the historical Jesus led to a makeover of Jesus with a modern image. Harnack’s was seen as “the reflection of a Liberal Protestant face seen at the bottom of a deep well.” Schweitzer’s Jesus turned out to be Nietzsche’s “superman” in Galilean garb, “the one immeasurably great Man who was strong enough to think of Himself as the spiritual ruler of mankind.” Dominic Crossan’s Jesus is a subversive Cynic who combated colonial oppression with magic and meal. With such confusion can we hope to get at the truth? My answer is an argument in four stages which explores reasons for studying the historical Jesus and what they entail.

1. Reasons for Studying the Historical Jesus

1. Incredible as it may seem for a man aged barely thirty who died the death of a criminal, Jesus of Nazareth is the most compelling figure in history. Although he may not have intended to found a new religion, he not only gave rise to Christianity, but also has a place in Judaism and in Islam. With the world becoming increasingly a global village in which Moslems, Jews, and Christians are next-door-neighbors, it is

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more than ever important to investigate the identity of the historical Jesus.

2. John P. Meier, author of the magisterial *A Marginal Jew*, draws sharp distinctions between the “real Jesus,” the “theological Jesus,” and the “historical Jesus.” The “real Jesus” denotes the totality of what Jesus ever was and did. Because of distance in time and limited materials, it is impossible to recover the “real Jesus.” The “theological Jesus” is the Christ of Christian theology. The “historical Jesus” is the construct of critical history.² Meier goes on to say that, “the Jesus of history is not and cannot be the object of Christian faith . . . More than a millennium and a half of Christians believed firmly in Jesus Christ without having any clear idea of or access to the historical Jesus as understood today, yet no one will deny the validity and strength of their faith. The same can be said of many pious Christians in developed as well as undeveloping countries today.”³ Moreover, “the constantly changing, often contradictory portraits of the historical Jesus served up by scholars, however useful in academia, cannot be the object of Christian faith for the universal Church.”⁴

I agree with Meier over the “real Jesus,” but question his determination to keep apart the “theological Jesus” and the “historical Jesus.” As a Roman Catholic he may defer to the Church’s Magisterium. But as a Protestant, an Episcopal priest, and a professor of systematic theology since 1978, I shudder at the thought of leaving theology to the theologians. Nor can I treat Jesus studies as a pastime for academics. Meier points to the changing and contradictory portraits of the historical Jesus. But one can equally point to the constantly changing and often contradictory portraits presented by orthodoxy. One needs only think of the feuding schools of Antioch and Alexandria, the patchwork compromise formula of Chalcedon, the Apostles’ Creed which reduces the life of Jesus to a mere comma between “born of the Virgin Mary” and “suffered under Pontius Pilate,” and John Henry Newman’s bizarre insistence that Jesus was not “in the English sense of the word, a man.”

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³ *A Marginal Jew I*, 197.
⁴ *A Marginal Jew I*, 198.