For a systematic theologian, it is an honour to be asked to contribute to a scholarly discussion of the prestige lecture delivered by my distinguished and esteemed colleague Michael Wolter. Rarely among theologians do historians and systematicians interact with each other. Systematic theologians are seen by most historians as turning a blind eye to the intricacies of the debates historians are involved in, when they refer to Scripture and to church history; and by many systematic theologians, New Testament scholars and church historians are regarded as hermeneutically naïve positivists. So most of the systematics put forward their quotations from Scripture with a (I admit: slightly) guilty conscience. And the scholars of the New Testament hide their hermeneutical reflections in the introductions or in the epilogues of their commentaries, hoping they will not be read by their colleagues either of the historic or of the systematic department.

There are few New Testament scholars who are considered coequal by systematics and at the same time esteemed highly by their New Testament colleagues. Michael Wolter is one such. In his brilliant text, he deals with the subject both groups of scholars are supposed to be interested in and on which they are supposed to share their insights with each other: the traditionally so-called “quest for the historical Jesus”. In a first paragraph (I.), I’ll give a short outline of his paper and present a few critical comments, culminating in the question raised in the title of this paper; in the second paragraph (II.), I present a systematician’s view on the quest for the so-called historical Jesus, and in the course of that, I will try to put forward an answer to the question posed in the title.

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1 I am very grateful to Jacob Corzine, M. Div., for translating most of this text. All mistakes are mine.
1. THE POSITION OF MICHAEL WOLTER

1.1 Outline of Wolter’s Position

1.1.1 The “Anti-Docetic Option”
Michael Wolter seeks to surpass the antithesis of the “historical Jesus” and the “Jesus Christ” as an object of Christian faith (the risen Christ etc.) established in the positions of Reimarus on the one hand and, for instance, Martin Kähler or Rudolf Bultmann on the other. He suggests a third path beyond these alternatives by pointing out, first, that the Christian Easter confession identifies one particular historical person as the “kyrios” and as risen and being placed at the right hand of the Father; and second, therefore, that Christian faith is interested not only in the risen Christ experienced as present in the Church but is interested in the continuity and identity of this heavenly person with the specific human being that led this particular life of a rabbi raised in Galilee, who travelled through Judea to Jerusalem and was crucified there around the year 28.

1.1.2 Images of Jesus
Wolter shares this anti-docetic option with Ernst Käsemann and his Second Quest for the historical Jesus; I will return to that (pp. 195–196). Since then, the crucial question has been how to fit these two aspects of the person of Christ together. In order to avoid the old trenches, Wolter suggests distinguishing different “images” of Jesus Christ resp. types of images (pp. 1–17)—all of these images are different kinds of constructions of Christ on different levels corresponding to different interests in or approaches to this person. Wolter stresses the fact that there is no approach to Jesus Christ that is not an image and in this sense a construction—this is true for an historical approach as well as for the different levels of religious interpretation, for the remembrance of contemporaries and for the own self-understanding of Jesus of Nazareth. Wolter is not a radical constructivist but assumes that all the images refer to one and the same reality beyond all images. But at the same time he holds that we have this reality only in constructed images and by constructing images.

1.1.3 The Truth of Images?
Wolter then asks if there is a criterion which enables us to decide whether or not the truth claims of these constructions are valid, and links to that