

THE JESUS WE'LL NEVER KNOW

The quest for the Historical Jesus has failed. But our faith is founded on something deeper.

In the CHRISTIANITY TODAY article “The Jesus We’ll Never Know,” author Scot McKnight points out that we all tend to remake Jesus in our own image. New Testament scholar McKnight gives students in his classes a standardized psychological test. “The results are nothing short of astounding,” he says. “The first part is about Jesus. It asks students to imagine Jesus’ personality, with questions such as, ‘Does he prefer to go his own way rather than act by the rules?’ and ‘Is he a worrier?’ The second part asks the same questions of the students, but instead of ‘Is he a worrier?’ it asks, ‘Are you a worrier?’ The test is not about right or wrong answers, nor is it designed to help students understand Jesus. Instead, if given to enough people, the test will reveal that we all think Jesus is like us.” Much of the recent Jesus scholarship, McKnight insists, reveals more about the scholars who promulgate it than it does the central figure of the New Testament.



Scripture: Mark 4:35–41; 8:27–38; 9:1–8; Acts 9:1–19

Based on: “The Jesus We’ll Never Know,” by Scot McKnight, CHRISTIANITY TODAY



HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE FOR A GROUP STUDY

This Bible study can be used for an individual or a group. If you intend to lead a group study, follow these simple suggestions.



- 1** Make enough copies of the participant's guide for everyone in the group. If you would like your group to have more information, feel free to copy the leader's guide for them instead.
- 2** Don't feel that you have to use all the material in the study. Almost all of our studies have more information than you can get through in one session, so feel free to pick and choose the teaching information and questions that will meet the needs of your group. Use the teaching content of the study in any of these ways: for your own background and information; to read aloud (or summarize) to the group; for the group to read silently.
- 3** Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting people to open up.
- 4** When working through the questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for your group to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.
- 5** Begin and end the session in prayer.

Part 1 **IDENTIFY THE CURRENT ISSUE**

Note to leader: Provide each person with "The Jesus We'll Never Know" from CHRISTIANITY TODAY, included at the end of this study.

Depending on whom you talk to, there is not just one Jesus, but many. McKnight lists several currently in fashion: There is the "Jewish Jesus," who through historical studies has been set in his Jewish context. He is "the Jesus who was crucified under Pontius Pilate and, according to the witness of many, was raised again." Then there is the "canonical Jesus," as interpreted by the writers of the New Testament. This Jesus was "interpreted ... [in] terms like 'Messiah,' 'Son of God,' and 'Son of Man,' ... [and] the agent of God's redemption." Next we have the "orthodox Jesus," the one further interpreted by the creeds and traditions of the church as "God from God, Light from Light," and so on. Finally we come to the "historical Jesus," a figure reconstructed from the gospels using narrow historical criteria such as the principle of "double dissimilarity" to decide which parts of the gospel accounts are true and which are false. Complicating matters, each scholar has a different "historical Jesus" in mind, usually fashioned in his or her own image. Some of these scholars then worship the Jesus they have created. How about us? Given all these options, what's a Christian to think ... and believe?

Discussion Starters:

- [Q] What are some popular conceptions of Jesus in art and in the media? Which aspects of Jesus do they emphasize, and which do they leave out?
- [Q] In what ways is your mental picture of Jesus like you and not like you?
- [Q] Scholarship is held in high regard in our culture. In what ways is it an asset in evaluating who Jesus is, and in what ways is it a liability?
- [Q] If there are so many pictures of Jesus, how do we decide which is right?

Part 2 **DISCOVER THE ETERNAL PRINCIPLES**

Teaching Point One: Jesus explodes our categories.

Every scholar thinks he or she has a handle on Jesus. Some say he is a first-century revolutionary; others that he is a prophet-healer; others, a pithy cynic. Even the disciples had their preconceived notions of the carpenter's son from Nazareth. Certainly at first they saw him on a human level as a representative of God, a teacher, and perhaps a

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prophet. They saw him as Messiah, but did not yet grasp the full import of what that meant. Yet one day on the Sea of Galilee they were suddenly faced with something—*Someone*—utterly beyond their categories. As the 13 men sat in a fishing boat built for 15, which recent archaeology suggests was around 26.5 feet long, 4.5 feet high, and 7.5 feet wide, an unexpected storm came up in an area prone to them. Fearing for their lives, they encountered a Force both wilder and more shocking than the storm. In the end, they saw their old notions as wholly inadequate.

Read Mark 4:35–41.

[Q] After a long day of ministering to the crowds, Jesus suggests that they get in the boat and go to the other side of the lake (v. 35). They go, taking other boats along (v. 36). What does it mean that Jesus was the instigator of this incident? How does this fact apply to our own lives?

[Q] Have you ever found yourself in a storm on the water? If so, describe it for us.

[Q] Contrast the responses of the disciples and Jesus. What upset the disciples? What upset Jesus? Why the difference?

[Q] Jesus controlled the wind and the sea (v. 39). What does this say about his power? About his identity? About his ability to help us in times of extremity?

Teaching Point Two: Jesus defines his identity and mission—and ours.

Scholars often pick and choose what aspects of the life and ministry of Christ they will highlight—and believe. “Most historical Jesus scholars assume that the Gospels have overcooked their portrait of Jesus, and that the church’s Trinitarian theology wildly exceeds anything Jesus thought about himself and anything the evangelists believed,” McKnight says. “These scholars pursue a Jesus who is less than or different from or more primitive than what the Gospels teach and the church believes. There is no reason to do historical Jesus studies—to probe ‘what Jesus was really like’—if the Gospels are accurate and the church’s beliefs are justified. There are only two reasons to engage in historical Jesus studies: first, to see if the church got him right; and second, if the church did not, to find the Jesus who is more authentic than the church’s Jesus.”

Read Mark 8:27–38. Jesus clearly was interested in how others understood him and his mission. In this passage, the disciples held to certain sincerely held beliefs that needed correcting—much as some of today’s scholars do.



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Jesus takes his Jewish disciples to a pagan area—Caesarea Philippi—and launches the conversation about his identity with a question: “Who do people say I am?” Upon hearing the various theories, he follows up with another question: “Who do *you* say I am?” (v. 29a, emphasis added).

[Q] Why does Jesus use questions to establish his identity, instead of making a statement?

Peter answers that Jesus is the *Christ*, the Greek word for the Hebrew *Messiah*, which means “anointed one.” Jesus doesn’t deny the title, but tells his followers to keep this knowledge quiet, since they believe it is the job of the Christ to “liberate the Jewish people from the yoke of Rome.”¹

[Q] In what ways do our ideas of Jesus solving our problems similarly miss the mark?

[Q] Jesus tells the disciples that his identity and mission involve suffering, which clearly upset Peter. How does knowing your own mission can include suffering hit you?

[Q] How do we ensure we are following God’s agenda instead of our own, more comfortable one?

[Q] Jesus explains what the “things of God” mean for his disciples: self-denial, taking up one’s cross, following him, losing one’s life to save it, standing for Christ when the temptation is to be ashamed (vv. 34–38). How does this alter your thinking about who Jesus is?

Optional Activity: *Give each person a piece of paper with a vertical line drawn down the middle. On the left side, have them list the “things of man” that they struggle with. On the right, have them list “things of God” that they believe the Lord is calling them to. Then spend one minute per person praying for one item on their lists.*

Teaching Point Three: Jesus is the unique Son of God.

McKnight argues that much of the historical Jesus scholarship rests on a platform of unbelief. Given that fact, Christians must make a choice. “We must be willing to ask, Whose Jesus will we trust?” McKnight says. “Will it be that of the evangelists and the apostles? Will it be that of the church—the creedal, orthodox Jesus? Will it be the latest proposal from a brilliant historian? Or will it be our own consensus based on modern-day historical scholarship? There is an irreducible futility to the historical Jesus enterprise.” Perhaps the voice we should listen to is the voice of God.

¹ ESV Study Bible, p. 1910.



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Read Mark 9:1–8.

Having just warned his followers of the cost of discipleship, Jesus promises them the reward of seeing the coming of the powerful kingdom of God (9:1). While the interpretations of this saying are many, it is clearly linked with what has come before in 8:27–38.

[Q] Why do these experiences of suffering and glory go together—why does one help us in the other?

[Q] Then comes the transfiguration (v. 2–7). Describe its elements: What happened to the appearance of Jesus? Who arrived? What was Peter's response? Whose voice came from a cloud, and what did it say?

How do these words inform our understanding of Jesus scholarship?

Teaching Point Four: Jesus demands our allegiance.

Much of contemporary scholarship attempts to put us in the driver's seat. We decide which Jesus we will follow. We decide whether we believe the records of his words and deeds. We fashion God in our own image. But the real Jesus remains beyond our futile attempts to fit him into our boxes. At some point we must choose to believe.

"[O]ne thing the historical method cannot prove is that Jesus died *for our sins* and was raised *for our justification*," McKnight admits. "At some point, historical methods run out of steam and energy. Historical Jesus studies cannot get us to the point where the Holy Spirit and the church can take us. I know that once I was blind and that I can now see. I know that historical methods did not give me sight. They can't. Faith cannot be completely based on what the historian can prove." Yet in his grace, Jesus can break through the clutter and reach even the hardest of hearts.

Paul, a zealous persecutor of the fledgling Christian church, was also blind to God. On his way to Damascus, he was stopped in his tracks. Read Acts 9:1–19.

[Q] Jesus demanded Paul's obedience and gave him his marching orders (v. 6–16). Here again we see suffering intertwined with glory. Is Paul given an option? What information is he given about Jesus? What is his response? How can we emulate Paul's obedience to the Lord?

[Q] Ananias also obeys (v. 17). How can we be an Ananias to those to whom Jesus is speaking? Name at least one person?



Part 3 **APPLY YOUR FINDINGS**

Scot McKnight has shown how we often make Jesus in our own image. Many of today's scholars searching for the historical Jesus are susceptible to the same temptation. Their creations are as varied as they are, and they rarely bring us closer to the real Jesus. This study has shown us that the real Jesus can be reliably found in the pages of Scripture. And he is the One to whom we must conform our lives, not him to ours.

First, we see that Jesus explodes our categories. He is bigger and wilder than anything we can reason out or imagine. While such knowledge can bring fear, it should also bring comfort and security. Second, Jesus defines who he is and what he came to do—and what we are to do if we follow him. The scholars and everyone else may have their say, but Jesus gets the final word. Third, Jesus is not one prophet among many. He is the unique Son of God. Fourth, Jesus is a Lord who demands our faithful obedience. But he rewards that commitment to him out of his grace.

So even if the search for the historical Jesus has come to a dead end, the search for the real Jesus has the prospect of a happy conclusion. That's because, though the other Jesuses are made in our image, the *real* Jesus is the image of God and can make himself known. We can know him if we are willing to follow him.


Action Point: *Break into pairs and pray for the person you can be "Ananias" to. Consider how you might suffer for them so that they can know Jesus' glory.*


— *Stan Guthrie is author of* Missions in the Third Millennium: 21 Key Trends for the 21st Century *and of the forthcoming* All That Jesus Asks: How His Questions Can Teach and Transform Us *(Baker). A CT editor at large, he writes a column for* BreakPoint.org *and blogs at* stanguthrie.com.


RECOMMENDED RESOURCES


ChristianBibleStudies.com

- **Essentials in Knowing God:** This 10-session Bible study will deepen your relationship with God by focusing on him and discovering what he is like. This course will also teach you how to repent, find forgiveness, and get rid of guilt. Finally, it will help you fill your prayer life with joy and beauty.
- **Who Is God?:** This 12-session Bible study will help you think realistically and practically about who God is. It will help you understand what the Scriptures have to say about him, and how to make him a part of your daily experience.

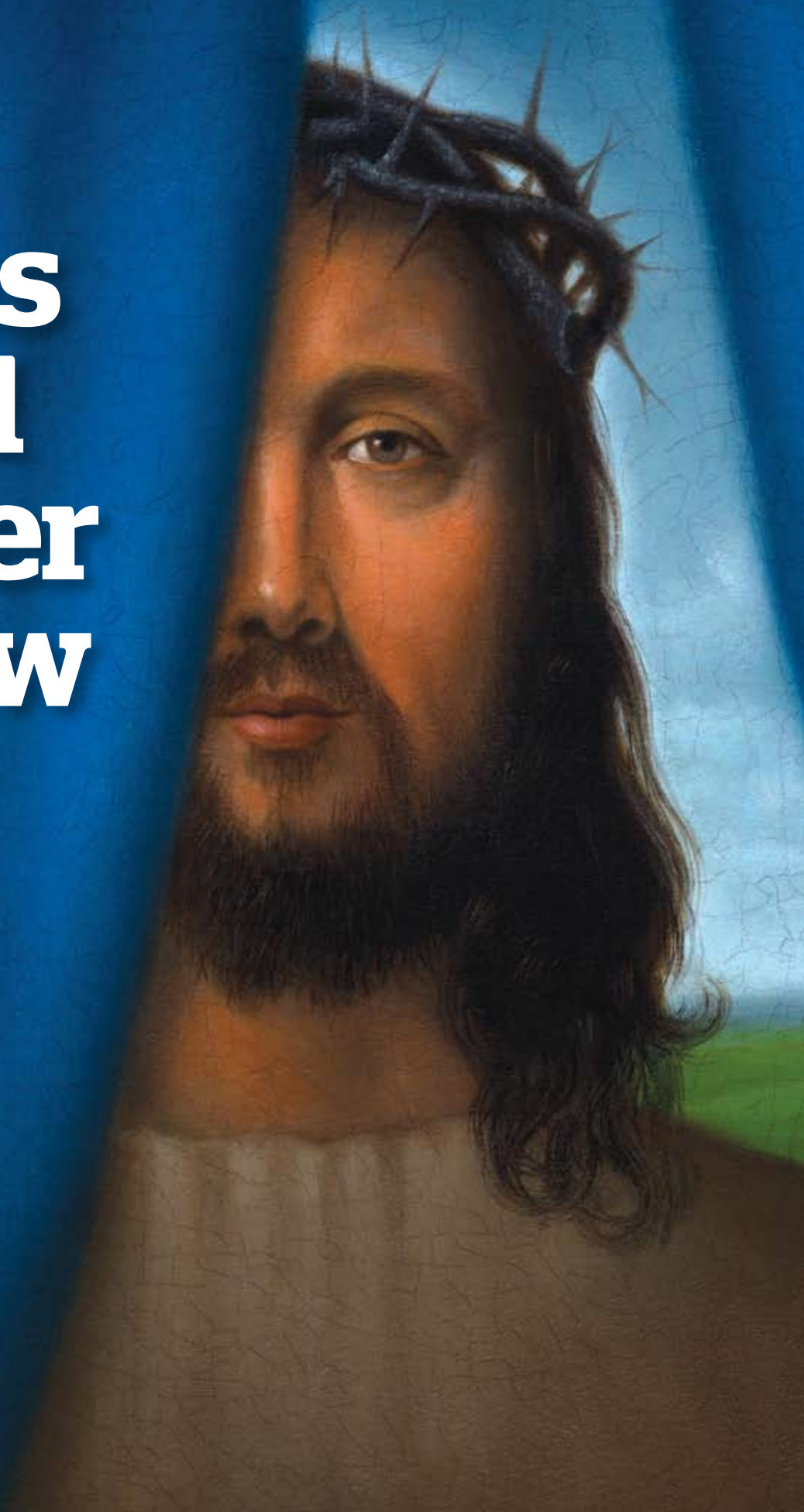
 **The Story of the Christ**, by Scot McKnight (Baker, 2006). McKnight's compelling introduction provides helpful background information on the sources of our information (the Gospels), the religious setting of Jesus' life, the heart of Jesus' teaching, and a summation of what kind of person Jesus was. The book then offers a continuous narrative account of the life and words of Jesus, woven together from the four canonical Gospels.

 **Introducing New Testament Interpretation**, by Scot McKnight (Baker, 1990). A strong foundation in biblical exegesis. Written for those with some knowledge of Greek, seven detailed essays by noted scholars cover New Testament background and social settings, theological synthesis, textual criticism, Greek grammar and word analysis, and more.

 **Jesus Mean and Wild: The Unexpected Love of an Untamable God**, by Mark Galli (Baker, 2008). This award-winning study of troubling passages in the Gospel of Mark reveals an untamable and militant Messiah—and offers proof that we should be anything but comfortable with Christ. A bold wake-up call for sleeping believers and a training manual for devoted disciples.

 **ntwrightpage.com**. Information and insights about N. T. Wright, one of the leading biblical scholars of this generation.

The Jesus We'll Never Know



Why scholarly
attempts to discover
the 'real' Jesus have
failed. And why
that's a good thing.
By Scot McKnight

IN THE OPENING DAY of my class on Jesus of Nazareth, I give a standardized psychological test divided into two parts. The results are nothing short of astounding.

The first part is about Jesus. It asks students to imagine Jesus' personality, with questions such as, "Does he prefer to go his own way rather than act by the rules?" and "Is he a worrier?" The second part asks the same questions of the students, but instead of "Is he a worrier?" it asks, "Are you a worrier?" The test is not about right or wrong answers, nor is it designed to help students understand Jesus. Instead, if given to enough people, the test will reveal that we all think Jesus is like us. Introverts think Jesus is introverted, for example, and, on the basis of the same questions, extroverts think Jesus is extroverted.

Spiritual formation experts would love to hear that students in my Jesus class are becoming like Jesus, but the test actually reveals the reverse: Students are fashioning Jesus to be more like themselves. If the test were given to a random sample of adults, the results would be measurably similar. To one degree or another, we all conform Jesus to our own image.

Since we are pushing this point, let's not forget historical Jesus scholars, whose academic goal is to study the records, set the evidence in historical context, render judgment about the value of the evidence, and compose a portrait of "what Jesus was really like." They, too, have ended up making Jesus in their own image.

HEYDAY FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS

In the 1980s, the central academic organization for biblical studies, the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), was energized in remarkable ways by a renewed interest in the historical Jesus, a project that had been abandoned for some decades. At that time, the Jesus Seminar, designed by former childhood preacher and fervent critic of all things orthodox Robert Funk, frequently made headlines. Noted scholars sat at

Illustrations by Rob Day

tables and voted on what Jesus really said and did based on the historical evidence. Funk and others drew up their conclusions in books that supposedly revealed the real Jesus.

Some of these studies were outlandish, some much closer to orthodoxy and the canonical Gospels. The headline-grabbing names included Ben F. Meyer, E. P. Sanders, John Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg, Paula Fredriksen, and N. T. (Tom) Wright. I have sat in packed lecture halls to watch Tom and Dom go at it, and I've listened in as two friends, Marc and Tom, bantered back and forth about who was getting it right. Paula, a Catholic convert to Judaism, continued to warn the entire discipline that too many errors were being made about Judaism. Those were heady days, and I remember giving a paper to over 500 scholars about how Jesus understood his own death. The neon-light days for the historical Jesus are now over.

So, what did the loaded expression “the historical Jesus” really refer to?

To begin with, “Jesus” refers to the Jesus who lived and breathed and ate and talked and called disciples. This Jesus is the Jesus who was crucified under Pontius Pilate and, according to the witness of many, was raised again. Through historical studies, this Jesus has been set in his Jewish context. We might call this Jesus the “Jewish Jesus.”

Then again, the four evangelists and the other New Testament authors, because they encountered Jesus in the context of how Scripture unfolded, interpreted Jesus by using terms like “Messiah,” “Son of God,” and “Son of Man,” understanding him as the agent of God’s redemption. We might call this Jesus the “canonical Jesus.”

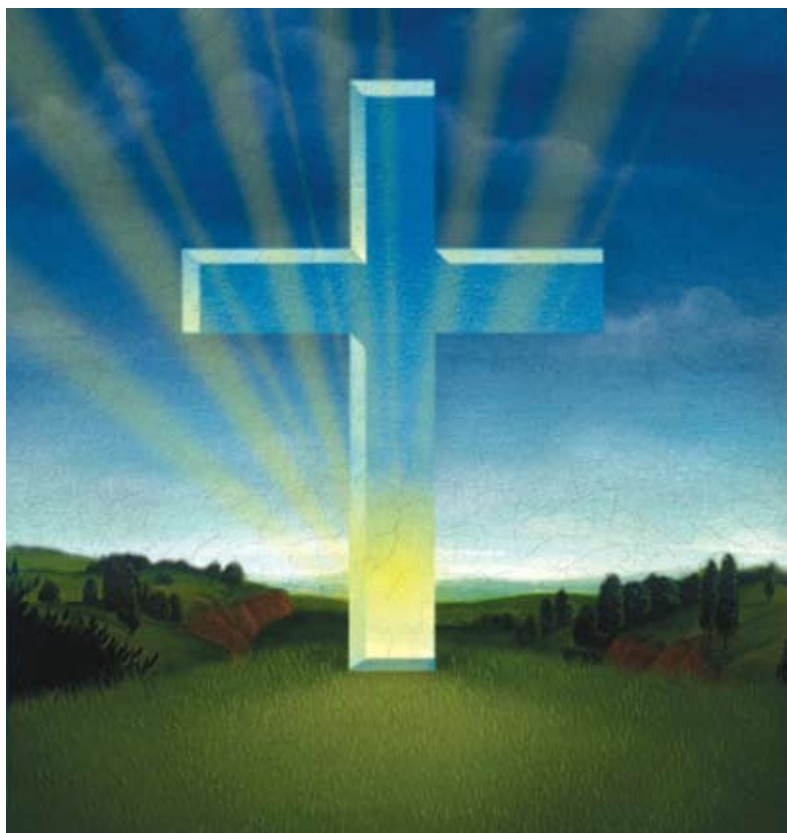
One more level needs to be observed: the church has amplified its understanding of “Jesus,” because it has interpreted Jesus in light of theological concerns. Let us refer to this Jesus as the “orthodox Jesus,” the second person of the Trinity, God from God and Light from Light.

But the historical Jesus is someone or something else. The historical Jesus is the Jesus whom scholars have reconstructed on the basis of historical methods over against the canonical portraits of Jesus in the Gospels of our New Testament, and over against the orthodox Jesus of the church. The historical Jesus is more like the Jewish Jesus than the canonical Jesus or the orthodox Jesus. Drawing distinctions between these various Jesuses is important in order to understand what has happened in the contemporary academic scene.

First, the historical Jesus is the Jesus whom scholars reconstruct on the basis of historical methods. Scholars differ, so reconstructions differ. Furthermore, the methods that scholars use differ, so the reconstructions differ all the more. But this must be said: Most historical Jesus scholars assume that the

Gospels are historically unreliable; thus, as a matter of discipline, they assess the Gospels to see if the evidence is sound. They do this by using methods common to all historical work but that are uniquely shaped by historical Jesus studies. The essential criterion used in most historical Jesus studies is called “double dissimilarity.” Even though it is riddled with holes, this method is still used by many historical Jesus scholars.

According to the criterion of double dissimilarity, the only sayings or actions of Jesus that can be trusted are those that are dissimilar to both Judaism at the time of Jesus and to the beliefs of the earliest Christians immediately after Jesus. One



of the most noteworthy examples is Jesus’ characteristically calling God *Abba*, a title for God rarely found in Judaism or in earliest Christianity.

This example, though, is problematic from the get-go: *Abba* (an affectionate term for “Father,” something akin to “Daddy”) is in fact not genuinely doubly dissimilar, for it is found in Judaism, if rarely, as well as in Aramaic in the New Testament; moreover, the word *Father* is found everywhere. But, historical exceptions aside, that Jesus called God *Abba* won the day as a historically reliable attribute, and therefore won the hearts of all historical Jesus scholars.

Other criteria were developed, criticized, dropped, and modified, but all have this in common: Historical Jesus scholars reconstruct what Jesus was like *by using historical methods to*

determine what in the Gospels can be trusted.

Second, the word *reconstruct* needs more attention. Most historical Jesus scholars assume that the Gospels have overcooked their portrait of Jesus, and that the church's Trinitarian theology wildly exceeds anything Jesus thought about himself and anything the evangelists believed. These scholars pursue a Jesus who is less than or different from or more primitive than what the Gospels teach and the church believes. There is no reason to do historical Jesus studies—to probe “what Jesus was really like”—if the Gospels are accurate and the church's beliefs are justified. There are only two reasons to engage in historical Jesus studies: first, to see if the church got him right; and second, if the church did not, to find the Jesus who is more authentic than the church's Jesus.

This leads to a fundamental observation about all genuine historical Jesus studies: *Historical Jesus scholars construct what is in effect a fifth gospel.* The reconstructed Jesus is not identical to the canonical Jesus or the orthodox Jesus. He is the reconstructed Jesus, which means he is a “new” Jesus.

I can establish that the tomb was empty and that resurrection is the best explanation for the empty tomb. But one thing the historical method cannot prove is that Jesus died for our sins and was raised for our justification.

Furthermore, these scholars by and large believe in the Jesus they reconstruct. During what's called the “first quest” for the historical Jesus, in the early 20th century, Albert Schweitzer understood Jesus as an apocalyptic Jesus. In the latest quest, Sanders's Jesus is an eschatological prophet; Crossan's Jesus is a Mediterranean peasant cynic full of wit and critical of the Establishment; Borg's Jesus is a mystical genius; Wright's Jesus is an end-of-the-exile messianic prophet who believed he was God returning to Zion. We could go on, but we have made our point: Historical Jesus scholars *reconstruct what Jesus was really like and orient their faith around that reconstruction.*

This leads to a third point, one that needs renewed emphasis today: Historical Jesus scholars reconstruct Jesus in conscious contrast with the categories of the evangelists and the beliefs of the church. Wright is the most orthodox of the well-known historical Jesus scholars; I can count on one hand the number of historical Jesus scholars who hold orthodox beliefs. The inspiration for historical Jesus scholarship is that the Gospels overdid it, and that the church more or less absorbed the Galilean prophet into Greek philosophical categories. The quest for the historical Jesus is an attempt to get behind the theology and the established faith to the Jesus who was—I must say it this way—much more like the Jesus we would like him to be.

One has to wonder if the driving force behind much historical Jesus scholarship is more an *a priori* disbelief in orthodoxy than a historian's genuine (and disinterested) interest in what really happened. The theological conclusions of those who

pursue the historical Jesus simply correlate too strongly with their own theological predilections to suggest otherwise.

The question that many of us in the discipline must ask is this: Can theology or Christology or, more importantly, faith itself be connected to the vicissitudes of historical research and results?

WHOSE JESUS WILL WE TRUST?

The last session on the historical Jesus that I attended at the SBL meetings met in a small room, and there were about 20 of us there. The session, during which I gave a short paper, tells the story of the discipline itself.

The scholarly hope that we would discover the original Jesus had crashed against the rugged rocks of reality, and on that day we witnessed the end of a disciplinary era. One by one, most of us had become convinced that no matter how hard we tried, reaching the uninterpreted Jesus was nearly impossible—however fun and rewarding it was and however many insights about the Gospels we discovered along the way.

Furthermore, a reconstructed Jesus is just that—one scholar's version of Jesus. It is unlikely to convince anyone other than the scholar, his or her students (who more or less feel obligated to agree), and perhaps a few others.

German theologian Martin Kähler convinced his generation that faith in Jesus could not and should not rest on historians' conclusions about what did and did not happen and the consequent reconstructions that entailed. We must be will-

ing to ask, *Whose Jesus will we trust?* Will it be that of the evangelists and the apostles? Will it be that of the church—the creedal, orthodox Jesus? Will it be the latest proposal from a brilliant historian? Or will it be our own consensus based on modern-day historical scholarship? There is an irreducible futility to the historical Jesus enterprise.

We have now seen the death of latest historical Jesus studies as we know them. Well, not for all, because some are busy trying to reconstruct Jesus for themselves and for any who will listen. Still, the enthusiasm is gone, and the critical proposals are more often met with a ho-hum “yet one more” than a hope that we may once and for all have found the one who was buried under the interpretation of the earliest Christians.

Sitting on my desk is volume four of J. P. Meier's *Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. What began as a two-volume venture has doubled, and one or two more volumes are forthcoming. Volume one generated all kinds of conversation; volume four entered the market with barely a notice. Sitting next to Meier on my desk is Martin Hengel's *Jesus und das Judentum*, over 700 pages and perhaps the last volume from the titan of scholarship. Someone will translate Hengel, doctoral students will read it, professors will use it, reviewers will say that it's brilliant, an occasional pastor will find it useful, but in a decade it will all be forgotten. Why? Historical Jesus scholarship has come to the end of the road.

Two recent scholars have read the obituary for historical Jesus studies. James D. G. Dunn, in both the hefty *Jesus*

Remembered and the slender *A New Perspective on Jesus*, argues that the furthest we can get behind the Gospels is to the underlying strata of Jesus as his earliest followers remembered him. That is as far as we can go. That is the Jesus who gave rise to the Christian faith, and that is the only Jesus worth pursuing. In Dunn's view, the "remembered" Jesus contains the faith perspective of the earliest followers of Jesus, and behind that faith perspective we cannot go.

Dale Allison, whom I consider the most knowledgeable New Testament scholar in the United States, is less sanguine and more cynical than Dunn in his newest book, *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus*, which in my judgment plays *Taps* for the quest for the historical Jesus. After three decades of work in and around the historical Jesus, Allison sketches the variety of views about the historical Jesus and the supposed modern theory

conclusions: the historical Jesus game has run its course and it cannot deliver us the original Jesus.

WHAT HAS BEEN SHOWN

I now make a confession. For the better part of my academic career, I have participated in studies of the Gospels and the historical Jesus. I am an insider to the conversation, and have been part of the steering committee for the SBL's Historical Jesus Section. In fact, I was once asked to be the chair. Had that invitation come five years earlier, I would have eagerly accepted the responsibility. But that invitation came at the end of a long project of mine that culminated in my book *Jesus and His Death: Historiography, the Historical Jesus, and Atonement Theory*. I declined the position because I could no longer commit myself to historical Jesus studies. The last thing I wrote in that book was the first chapter, which was an essay about method and what historical Jesus studies can accomplish.



We must be willing to ask, Whose Jesus will we trust? Will it be that of the evangelists and the apostles? Will it be the church's orthodox Jesus? Or will it be the latest proposal from a brilliant historian?

that if we put our heads together we will arrive at firm conclusions. Allison offers this depressing conclusion: "Progress has not touched all subjects equally, and whatever consensus may exist, it remains mostly boring."

Allison admits this about one of his own books on Jesus: "I opened my eyes to the obvious: I had created a Jesus in my own image, after my own likeness." He's not done: "Professional historians are not bloodless templates passively registering the facts: we actively and imaginatively project. Our rationality cannot be extricated from our sentiments and feelings, our hopes and fears, our hunches and ambitions." So, he ponders, "Maybe we have unthinkingly reduced biography [of Jesus] to autobiography."

On top of this genuine problem is the problem of method. Allison: "The fragmentary and imperfect nature of the evidence as well as the limitations of our historical-critical abilities should move us to confess, if we are conscientious, how hard it is to recover the past." With one ringing line, Allison pronounces death: "We wield our criteria to get what we want."

There is, in other words, no value- or theology-free method that will enable us to get back to Jesus. Allison is not a total skeptic; he thinks that we can get behind the Gospels to find some genuine impressions. But his book led me to conclude, "The era is over."

Two scholars, both highly devoted to the discipline of historical Jesus studies, come from two angles to relatively similar

Attentive readers will observe that the first chapter relativizes the theological significance of historical Jesus efforts. I had tried my best to see where the methods would lead if I sought to examine *if* and *how* the historical Jesus understood his own death. Some of my results disappointed, because I wanted to be able to prove some texts as authentic that I found stubbornly resistant to the methods available to us. Historiography, I concluded, can only do so much. One day, while editing the final draft, I came across these words from Romans 4:25: "He was delivered over to death *for our sins* and was raised to life *for our justification*."

This is what I said to myself: As a historian I think I can prove that Jesus died and that he *thought* his death was atoning. I think I can establish that the tomb was empty and that resurrection is the best explanation for the empty tomb. But one thing the historical method cannot prove is that Jesus died *for our sins* and was raised *for our justification*. At some point, historical methods run out of steam and energy. Historical Jesus studies cannot get us to the point where the Holy Spirit and the church can take us. I know that once I was blind and that I can now see. I know that historical methods did not give me sight. They can't. Faith cannot be completely based on what the historian can prove. The quest for the real Jesus, through long and painful paths, has proven that much.

Scot McKnight is professor of religion at North Park University in Chicago, and the author of many books, including *The Jesus Creed*. Go to ChristianBibleStudies.com for "The Jesus We'll Never Know," a Bible study based on this article.

Should We Abandon Studying the Historical Jesus? **Two Responses.**



No, We Need History **N. T. Wright**

SCOT MCKNIGHT ADVOCATES a kind of fasting. I am to give up the lifetime habit of studying Jesus historically. Okay, it's Lent, but this is going to be harder than doing without Merlot. Or even Macallan.

But is this necessary? Or even coherent? Three comments, then three conclusions.

THERE'S HISTORY AND THEN THERE'S HISTORY

First, the words *history* and *historical* can refer to two different things: (a) past events, or (b) what people write about past events. Most people assume the former—"the historical American Civil War" means the Civil War that actually happened, not historians' reconstructions of the Civil War. Scot, however, suggests that "the historical Jesus" must *only* mean (b). I doubt that this will catch on. Yes, that's how many scholars use it, but not all. English usage allows, nay, encourages, sense (a). Even Scot uses it like that in his penultimate paragraph.

Second, Scot makes no distinction between different types of historical Jesus studies. Following Ben F. Meyer (*The Aims of Jesus*, 1978; new edition, 2002), I have demonstrated a massive gulf between the kind of historiography Scot describes and the kind I christened the "third quest." I reject the double dissimilarity criterion and have proposed the balancing "double similarity": Jesus must have been recognizably (if crucifiably) Jewish, and



No, We Need to Stay in the Conversation **Craig Keener**

SCOT MCKNIGHT IS RIGHT to insist that the Gospels rather than scholars' speculations are where we encounter Jesus. I myself recently argued in *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* that the Gospel writers' portrait of Jesus makes much better historical sense than scholars' historical reconstructions do.

But, while I agree wholeheartedly with Scot's main point, I want to make a case for why historical Jesus studies remain valuable.

IS JESUS RESEARCH DEAD?

I believe Scot underestimates the continued interest in historical Jesus research and, therefore, the importance of engaging it. While the historical Jesus group may have declined at the Society of Biblical Literature meetings, publishers and the media continue to address the topic. Likewise, scholars continue to publish and hold international symposiums on historical Jesus topics (e.g., the 2007 Princeton-Prague Symposium). Quests for the historical Jesus come and go, but no sooner are postmortems pronounced for one than another quest in a new form seems to rise. The persistence is inevitable so long as public interest in Jesus remains and current historical approaches survive.

As long as the historical questions are being asked, then, it is important for the Tom Wrights, Ben Witheringtons, and the many other believing scholars engaged in the discussion to articulate their

recognizably (if uniquely) the starting point for what we now call “the church.”

Not all historical Jesus scholarship is skeptical in intent or effect. Genuine historical study is necessary—not to construct a “fifth gospel,” but rather to understand the four we already have. History confounds not only the skeptic who says “Jesus never existed” or “Jesus couldn’t have thought or said this or that,” but also the shallow would-be “orthodox” Christian who, misreading the texts, marginalizes Jesus’ first-century Jewish humanity. Puzzle: I think Scot believes this too.

Third, when German scholars gave up historical Jesus research in the 1920s, they left a vacuum into which the “German Christians”

History cannot compel faith. But it is very good at clearing away the smoke screens behind which unfaith often hides.

inserted their non-Jewish Jesus, with appalling results. That was why New Testament scholar Ernst Käsemann insisted that, despite difficulties, we had to study Jesus historically. How will we ward off the next generation’s dangerous follies (not just Dan Brown, though he matters too) if we don’t do history?

CLEARING AWAY SMOKE SCREENS

Now three conclusions.

First, this isn’t about an “uninterpreted” Jesus. Jesus’ contemporaries perceived him within a network of narrative, symbol, and hope, and their stories about him reflect that. To say that “we can’t go behind that faith perspective” so that “the past is hard to recover” capitulates to a reductive modernist epistemology.

Second, of course history isn’t enough by itself. Back to Reformation theologian Philip Melancthon: It isn’t enough to know that Jesus is the Savior; I must know that he is the Savior *for me*. History cannot tell me that. But it can reconstruct the framework within which it makes sense—the biblical framework that Jesus and his followers took for granted. If Jesus didn’t really exist, or was really a revolutionary Zealot, or a proto-Buddhist mystic, or an Egyptian freemason, the “for me” floats like a detached helium balloon on the thin, vulnerable air of subjectivism. It is when we put Jesus in his proper *historical* context that the Resurrection proposes that he was the Messiah, that the Messiah is Lord of the world, and that he died and was raised *for me*. History is challenging, but also reassuring.

Third, history cannot compel faith. But it is very good at clearing away the smoke screens behind which unfaith often hides. History and faith are, respectively, the left and right feet of Christianity. Modernism hops, now on this foot (skeptical “historiography”), now on that (unhistorical “faith”). It’s tiring, dangerous, and unnecessary. Puzzle: I think Scot believes this too. ☩

N. T. Wright is Bishop of Durham in the Church of England. He is the author of many books, including *The Resurrection of the Son of God* and *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Augsburg Fortress).

perspective. While historical methods do not answer theological questions or compel faith, I can testify that in my much younger days as an unchurched atheist, they would have invited me to consider it.

Used rightly, these methods can be friends rather than foes of faith. The academy’s ground rules are limited, not always fair, and themselves open to challenge. Some methods, such as the double dissimilarity criterion, are now widely rejected. But many of the principles provide a minimal basis for dialogue among scholars of different persuasions. Through that dialogue, we can establish at least some historical information on which most scholars can agree.

For example, historians would normally take very seriously biographies written within a generation or two of their subjects. I contend that if skeptics really treated the Gospels as they treat other historical documents, they would be less skeptical. Using standard historical methods, we can challenge many skeptics’ doubts about Jesus.

PROBLEMS WITH CONVENTIONAL METHODS

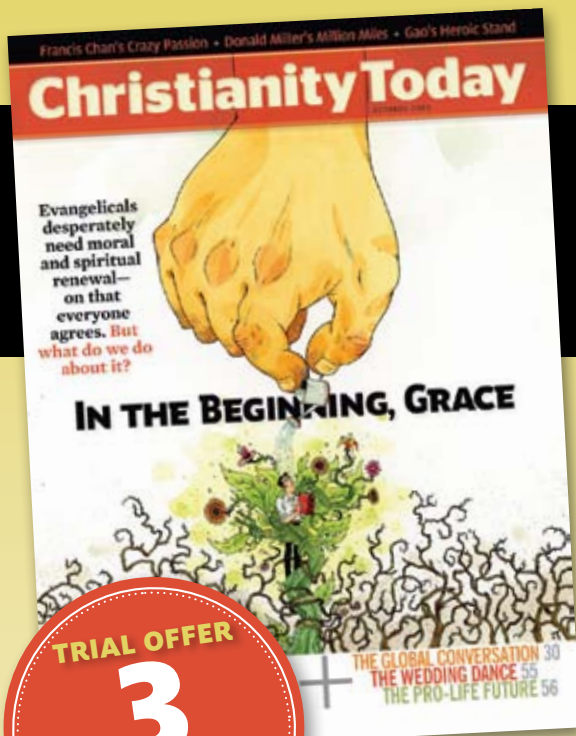
Some helpful criteria used by historians today go back to ancient historians, who probably indirectly provided models for Luke the Evangelist. Conventional historical methodology, however, never tells us everything about someone in the past. Nor does it provide the theological meaning of their actions or bring us into a living relationship with that person. Historical methods merely offer probabilities based on limited evidence. It is the nature of these methods that some events deemed historically improbable by scholars actually happened, while some events deemed probable actually did not.

Quests for the historical Jesus come and go, but no sooner are postmortems pronounced for one than another quest in a new form seems to rise.

Historiography—particularly the method by which historians weigh evidence and write history—thus proves inadequate to arbitrate revealed truth about God’s activity in history. Critics often work, to varying degrees, from a hermeneutic of suspicion, but Christians live by what New Testament scholar Richard Hays calls a hermeneutic of trust. Some skeptical scholars argue that we can believe only what we can prove using their methods (and then often place the bar of evidence impossibly high). In such cases, dialogue may require not just providing historical evidence, but also challenging our critics’ starting assumptions. Some further define historical method as excluding supernatural causes. Many philosophers today rightly challenge this assumption.

The historical Jesus dialogue will not go away. It affects public discourse; hence, evangelical scholars dare not ignore it. If you desire to experience the risen Lord personally, however, trust God, read the Bible, worship, pray, evangelize, and engage the world’s need. Scot’s reminder is therefore critical. ☩

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