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IN SEARCH OF Jesus

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of his life and its meaning

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IN SEARCH OF JESUS

*Some scholars seek answers in history and
redefine the meaning of his life and deeds*

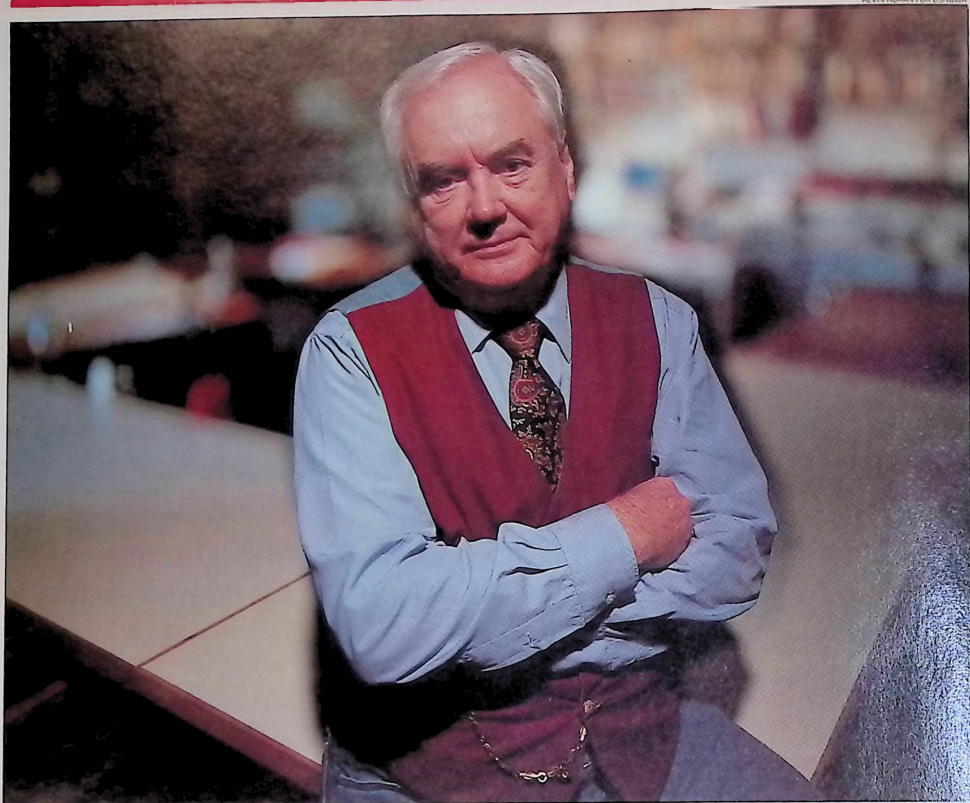
Whom do men say that I am?" Jesus once asked his disciples, according to Matthew's gospel. The disciples' answer—"some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah ... or one of the prophets"—revealed how even then there was little consensus over the identity of the enigmatic preacher from Galilee. And the controversy endures today. While believers through the ages have echoed Peter's faith-filled declaration, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," some modern scholars say that historical evidence reveals a much different portrait of Jesus than the one in Christian creeds.

Among biblical scholars, no issue has stirred more activity, excitement or acrimony than the "quest for the historical Jesus." In the past 10 years alone, dozens of books have been published on the topic. Some, based on readings of Scripture and recent archaeological evidence, have presented dramatic portraits of Jesus as a secular sage, a cynic revolutionary and a mystic healer. Others have offered less radical refinements of traditional views.

The historical quest has been denounced by some as a frontal assault on

Christian faith and an attempt to undermine the Bible's authority. Yet proponents find in it hope for a more rational basis for belief and a clearer essence of Jesus's teachings. At the heart of the debate is whether it is possible to improve upon the words and images of Jesus in the Christian Scriptures. Many scholars think the gospels are unreliable records since they were written as proclamation, not objective history, decades after Jesus's death. But one new book argues that the gospels were recorded much earlier than most scholars think and likely contain eyewitness accounts. The book *Eyewitness to Jesus*, by Carsten Thiede and Matthew D'Ancona, is based on a new analysis of ancient papyrus fragments containing parts of Matthew's gospel.

Perhaps the most intriguing part of this modern quest is how the interests and personalities of scholars intersect with their work. The "control-beliefs of a scholar," writes Gregory Boyd, theology professor at Bethel College in St. Paul, Minn., in his book *Cynic, Sage or Son of God?*, "determine what kind of Jesus he or she is looking for by defining what kind of Jesus is and is not possible." That is why examining the lives



ROBERT FUNK, JESUS SEMINAR

of leaders in the historical-Jesus movement is a key to understanding their findings.

REINVENT CHRISTIANITY

Even now, when Robert Funk addresses an audience, there are hints of the precocious young preacher who once led revival meetings in rural Texas. In a field characterized more often by esoteric discourse than revivalist fervor, the renowned biblical scholar and head of the controversial Jesus Seminar still has an evangelist's dramatic flair. Frequently cajoling listeners to repent their errors and behold Jesus.

But the Jesus who Funk commends to his audiences bears little resemblance to the Savior of his gospel-preaching youth. Stripped of what he now considers to be the artificial accretions of centuries of church tradition, the historical Jesus of Nazareth, in Funk's view, was

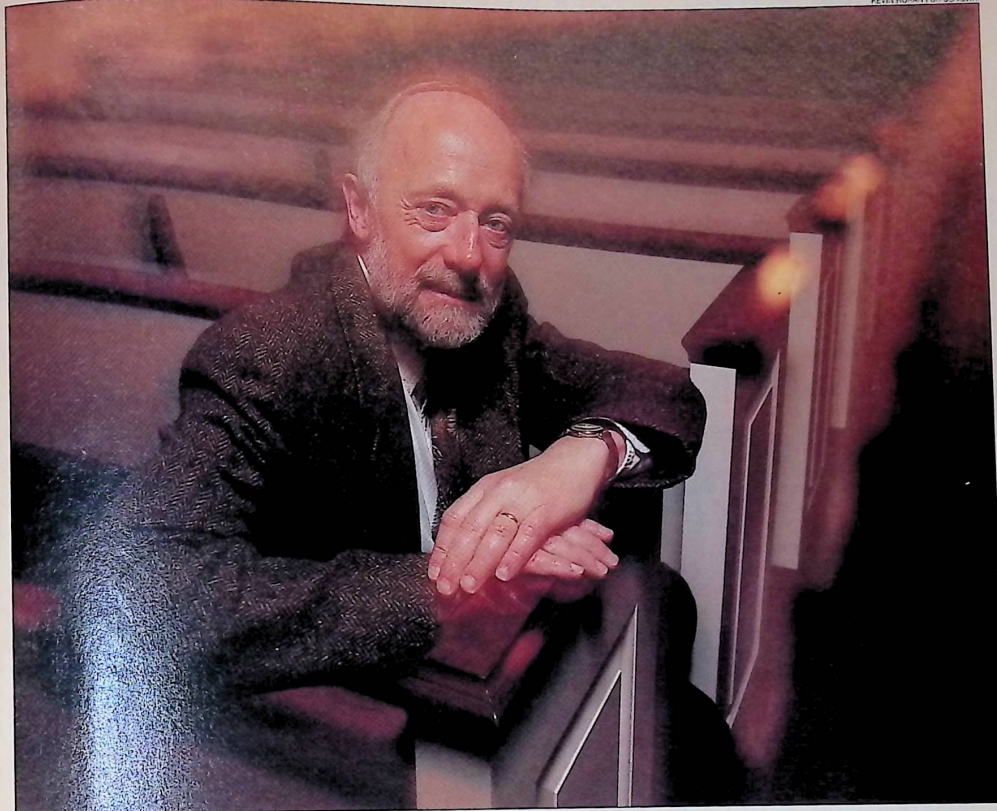
"Jesus pointed to what he called God's domain. His disciples tended to stare at the pointing finger."

probably more akin to a Jewish Socrates—or perhaps a Lenny Bruce—than the divine Son of God. The goal of his seminar, Funk recently told a California audience, is to "set Jesus free" from the "scriptural and creedal prisons in which we have entombed him. We aspire to no less than to roll away the stone from the door of the rock-cut tomb."

It is Funk's evangelistic zeal, as much as his unorthodox views, that has placed him and his California-based seminar at the forefront of the modern historical-Jesus quest and at the center of the

scholarly storm. They have drawn criticism both from mainstream academia, where Funk is viewed as something of a publicity hound, and from conservative scholars who consider him an enemy of traditional Christianity and of the Bible.

Schooled in biblical studies at Vanderbilt University, he taught at Texas Christian, Harvard and Emory universities, among other places, and became a leader in the Society of Biblical Literature, an organization of some 6,000 biblical scholars. But he split from the group in 1980, frustrated in his attempts to prod his colleagues into bridging the gap between the insulated world of biblical academia and real-world religious practice. "I tried to get them to go public with what we were doing to raise the literacy level of the public," he explains. "Without that, our religious tradi-



MARCUS BORG, THE MYSTIC

tions become crass, unhealthy and even demonic."

Funk organized the seminar in 1985 and set it to work examining the historicity of words and deeds of Jesus from the gospels and then reporting the results in press releases and in books published by its own Polebridge Press. Applying some conventional methods of textual analysis and other more disputed rules of evidence, the seminar, made up of about 50 religion professors, concluded that no more than 20 percent of the sayings and even fewer of the deeds attributed to Jesus are authentic. Among the castoffs: the Lord's Prayer, the sayings from the cross and any claims of Jesus to divinity, the virgin birth, most of his miracles and his bodily resurrection.

The Jesus that remains, which Funk describes in his forthcoming book *Honest to Jesus*, is a secular sage and a social

"There is a strong connection between images of Jesus and images of the Christian life."

critic who satirized the pious and championed society's poor and marginalized. He spoke in parables and aphorisms, often using humor or irony to make a point. "Jesus was perhaps the first stand-up Jewish comic," says Funk. He was "not political, not programmatic" and offered no detailed prescriptions for dealing with the issues of the world. Starting a new religion, says Funk, "would have been the farthest thing from his mind."

Funk now sees the seminar's role as laying the foundations for a new Refor-

mation. "Christianity as we have known it is anemic and wasting away," Funk told a California audience at a recent seminar meeting. It is time, Funk said, to "reinvent Christianity," complete with new symbols, new stories and a new understanding of Jesus.

"I don't know whether the churches will wake up to this," he says. "Most church officials regard us as a threat. But then, the Roman [Catholic] church regarded Luther as a threat. That's the way it is with reformers."

THE MYSTICAL TOUR

A long and winding road has led Marcus Borg to his conclusion that the historical Jesus was a "spirit person, subversive sage, social prophet and movement founder." Born and raised of Scandinavian stock in North Dakota, Borg began his journey with childhood

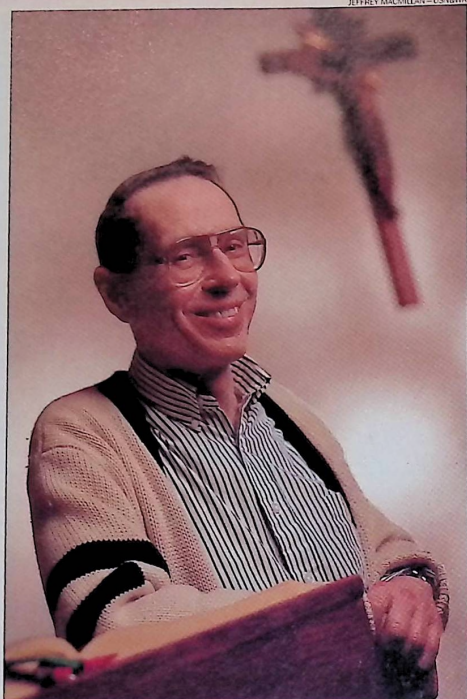
CULTURE & IDEAS

Lutheran hymns and, eventually, through study in college in Minnesota. His spiritual evolution, which he sometimes calls "tao" after Buddhist philosophy, included bouts of serious skepticism. At times, he says, he was a "closet agnostic" and a "closet atheist." He wrote of that period: "The bottom line was that I finally did not know what to do with the notion of God. On the whole, I thought there probably was no such reality."

At Union Theological Seminary in New York and then at Oxford University, where he received his doctorate, Borg found himself on a less traveled path. "The news that the 'Jesus of history' was very different from the Jesus I had heard about growing up in church seemed important to me," he writes in his 1994 book *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*. He was on the road to discovering a Jesus who was more concerned about this life than the afterlife, who taught subversive wisdom and who was intent on revitalizing Israel. He was also a "healer or holy person"—something of a Jewish mystic. "It seemed vaguely scandalous, and something I shouldn't tell my mother about," Borg wrote. "But I was hooked."

After studying sources as varied as the mystic novelist Carlos Castañeda, the psychologist and philosopher William James and the Buddha, Borg concluded that there were two Jesuses. One was the "pre-Easter Jesus, a powerful witness to the reality and character of God" and a radical cultural critic who preached the politics of compassion. The other was the "post-Easter Jesus, a living spiritual reality, God with a human face." Taken together, says Borg, these two Jesuses "made it possible for me to be a Christian again."

He alloyed conventional research, including sessions with the Jesus Seminar, with four-day fasts and excursions into the works of those seeking alternate realities (such as Castañeda's Indian seer, Don Juan). Sometimes, he contemplated his "big thoughts" during pipe-pulling sessions with his notebook



JOHN MEIER, DOGGED DIGGER

"The historical Jesus is not the real Jesus but only a fragmentary hypothetical reconstruction of him."

and a pint of Full Sail Ale at Bogart's pub in Portland, Ore.

Partly because of new archaeological evidence contained in things like the Dead Sea Scrolls, but mainly because of new methods to interpret centuries of previous studies, Borg believes that contemporary scholars understand "the world of Jesus better than any generation since perhaps A.D. 200." He has argued that the onset of the millennium will intensify the already burgeoning international interest in the historical Jesus and "a lot of 'Second Coming' talk."

Borg lives with his wife, Marianne, a priest at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, in Portland. He describes his children from his first marriage: "My son is gay and my daughter, who's adopted, is

black. I never thought I'd be so politically correct." That may be the only thing about Borg and his work that is.

A ROUGH SKETCH

The small book on the historical Jesus that John Meier set out to write in 1989 was supposed to have been a brief warm-up for a much weightier project he had long anticipated—a definitive, multivolume explication of the gospel of Matthew. The brief diversion turned into *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, a two-volume work in 1,600 pages. Now, Meier is working on a third volume, and he's not certain it will be the last. Matthew is still waiting. That, says Meier, a professor at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., is the compelling nature of the historical-Jesus quest. "It seems to have a life of its own."

Like many of his academic colleagues, Meier finds that the New Testament gospels have limited value as historical records. Still, he considers them to be the best information source on Jesus's life, offering far richer historical detail than the ancient biographies of many additional important figures. Among the conclusions Meier draws regarding the life of Jesus:

■ He was born probably around 7 B.C. in Nazareth, not in Bethlehem as the gospel of Luke says.

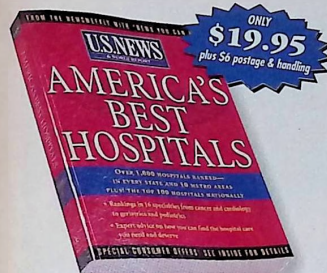
■ Despite official Catholic teaching that Mary, the mother of Jesus, remained a virgin all of her life, Meier says Jesus had four brothers and at least two sisters, details that emerge from the gospels of Mark and John and from the writings of Paul. The virgin birth of Jesus, says Meier, "cannot be proven or disproven" by historical investigation.

■ He had a brief ministry in Galilee as a teacher, prophet and worker of deeds that were perceived by some as miracles.

■ He was arrested in Jerusalem and crucified under Pontius Pilate somewhere around A.D. 30. His followers claimed he rose from the dead.

As interesting and as accurate as those facts may be, says Meier, they do not constitute "the real Jesus." The best that historians can hope for, says

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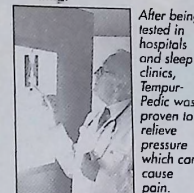
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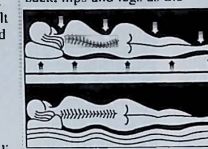
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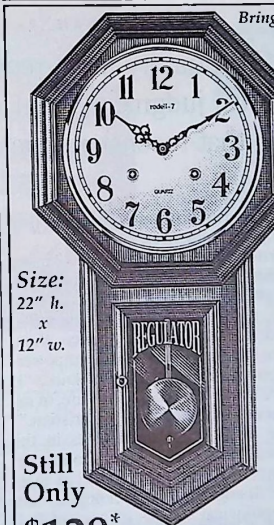


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CULTURE & IDEAS

Meier, is "sufficient data to draw a rough sketch."

Meier is widely regarded by his peers as meticulous and tidy as a historian, although some criticize his work as unimaginative and too beholden to official Catholic doctrine. A priest in the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York, Meier was raised in a Catholic neighborhood in the South Bronx, educated and ordained in Rome and taught in a New York seminary before moving to Washington. He remains close friends with New York's Cardinal John O'Connor.

Meier keeps his academic work and his faith separate. He notes, for example, that while he firmly believes in the virgin birth, the miracles and the resurrection of Jesus, "as a historian, I cannot claim the ability to either confirm or deny those." Too often, he says, "historical scholars make theological claims about Jesus" that "go beyond the realm of historical research. You can't mix theology and historical research without causing tremendous confusion."

Even so, says Meier, good historical data on Jesus "can help inform theology." And while it will never "create faith where there is none, it does say to the ordinary believer: You are not putting your faith in a fairy tale or some ahistorical symbol, but in a real person who was crucified in the first century."

UNCONVENTIONAL WISDOM

Jesus was a revolutionary peasant who resisted economic and social tyranny in Roman-occupied Palestine. He was a Jewish cynic who wandered from town to town, teaching unconventional wisdom and subverting oppressive social customs. He was a preacher who proclaimed "God's radical justice" and lived the idea so powerfully that it inspired a movement that changed the course of history. And if the clarity of his life and message, now long obscured, could be fully grasped today, the same could happen again.

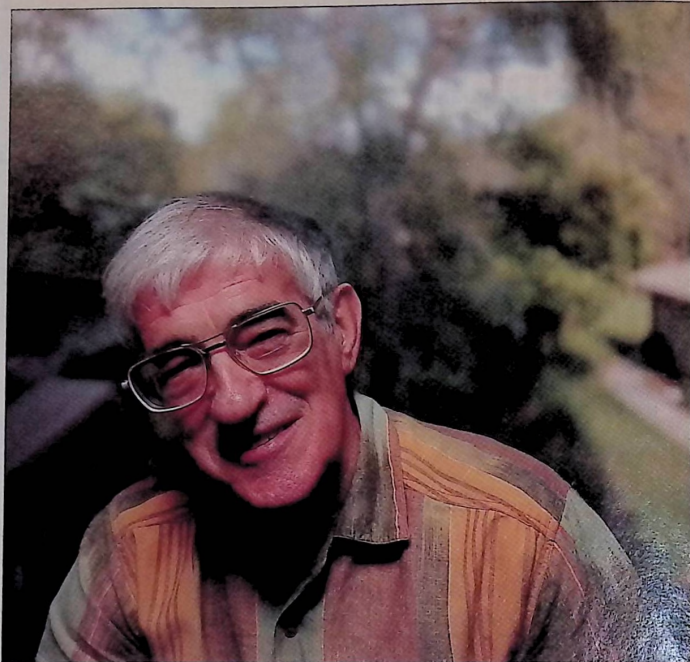
That's the gospel according to John Dominic Crossan, one of the most prolific of the modern questers, whose 1991 book, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, broke new ground in the field of Jesus research. Since then, the former Roman Catholic priest and professor emeritus at DePaul University in Chi-

cago has written two abbreviated works for popular audiences. Born and raised in Ireland, Crossan considers himself "Catholic through and through" despite the fact that he quit the Servite order to marry in 1969 and hasn't attended mass regularly since then. "There has never been a more empowering figure than Jesus," he explains. "If you are empowered by Jesus's life, in my judgment that makes you a Christian."

Like many of his colleagues in the historical Jesus movement, Crossan rejects most of the gospel record as inaccurate. Using modern sociological and anthropological studies of ancient Palestine as a backdrop, he attempts to reconstruct the historical Jesus from early "Jesus traditions" buried within the gospels and other noncanonical texts from the early church. While he has

come up with a vivid description and a list of sayings he believes can be traced to Jesus, Crossan thinks the evidence he's gathered would rule out most of Christianity's traditional teachings. Biblical accounts of the Last Supper and appearances of the risen Jesus, he says for example, are merely attempts by his devout followers to express their "continued experience" of his presence after the Crucifixion.

While Crossan's Jesus seems much more of a political animal than the traditional version that is made vivid in the nation's pulpits, he warns that it would be "the ultimate betrayal of Jesus" to make him either "totally political—he tried to start a political movement" or "totally religious—he was talking about the afterlife." The historical Jesus, says Crossan, "pro-



JOHN CROSSAN, THE GROUND SHAKER

"Christianity must repeatedly make its best historical judgment about who Jesus was then and what that reconstruction means as Christ now."

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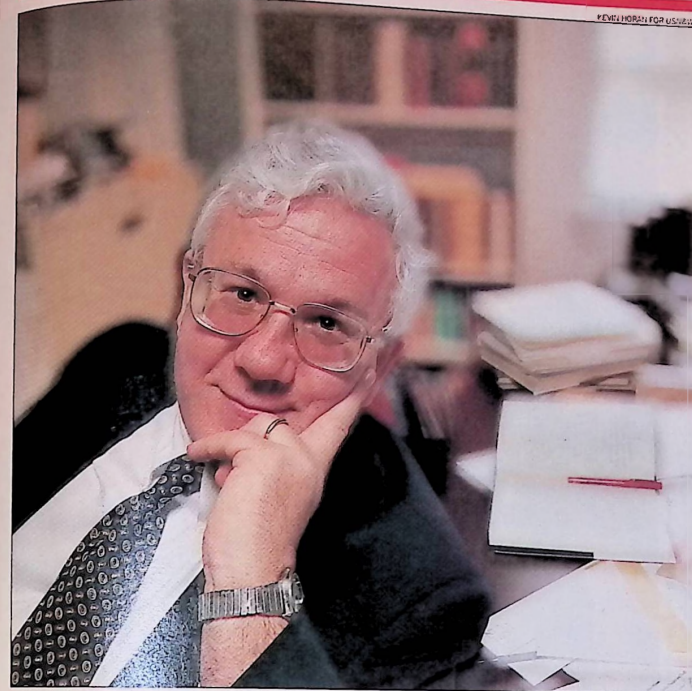
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LUKE JOHNSON, THE TRADITIONALIST

"The real Jesus for Christian faith is not simply a figure of the past but, very much and above all, a figure of the present."

claimed God's radical justice, which is extremely critical of the structures of almost any society – including ours."

THE COUNTEROFFENSIVE

As he surveyed the landscape of historical-Jesus research not long ago, Luke Timothy Johnson saw plenty that troubled him. Concerned that an "obsessive Jesus fixation" among biblical scholars posed danger for traditional understandings of Christianity, both among academics and the Christian faithful, he decided to join the fray. His new book, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*, already has marked the former Roman Catholic monk as one of the sharpest critics of the field and a hero among conservative Christians.

Johnson, a professor of New Testa-

ment and Christian origins at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University, takes his academic colleagues to task for producing what he considers ill-focused, often flimsy scholarship that reduces the "still powerfully alive" Christ of Christianity to a shadowy figure behind a thin chronology of sayings and deeds etched in unreliable ancient texts. The Christian faith, he argues, has never depended on the ability to verify details of Jesus's biography. "Religious knowledge," he says, "is not the same as historical knowledge." Rather, says Johnson, the faith of most Christians is sustained primarily by the "witness of the Holy Spirit in their present-day lives."

Johnson argues that the four gospels, the letters of Paul and a few "outsider texts" from the first and second centuries provide a credible, if patchy, history of

Jesus's life and ministry, including some firsthand accounts. They establish, says Johnson, that Jesus was a Jewish peasant who preached love and selflessness, gained some notoriety and was tested, tried under Pontius Pilate, crucified and buried and later appeared before witnesses who took him for the Messiah and dedicated themselves to spreading his gospel. Beyond that, he says, the historical process is hard-pressed to venture.

Indeed, the general acceptance of the historicity of the gospels among conservative scholars explains why so few of them have joined in the historical-Jesus quest, except to respond to the skepticism that often seems to dominate the scholarly writings. Among those who have entered the debate are British scholars James D. G. Dunn and N. T. Wright, both of whom have published works seeking to buttress the historical accuracy of the gospel portraits of Jesus.

But Johnson argues that most historical-Jesus research misses the biblical boat. While it may be interesting to examine the social, political, anthropological and cultural contexts of Jesus and his time, pinning down the historical Jesus "is hardly the point of Scripture," which is "more concerned with describing the character of Jesus" and his message.

Christianity, says Johnson, is an organic, evolving religion based, above all, on personal leaps and tests of faith. Johnson, who received his Ph.D. at Yale University in 1976, says his own most sacred religious beliefs are confirmed in experience, not in

texts. Orphaned at 10, he was separated from his five siblings and entered a Catholic minor seminary at 13. For the next 15 years he lived a monastic life, teaching and preaching until he fell in love with a student who "happened to be a divorced woman with six children." When they married, he left the priesthood and was banned from teaching at Catholic schools.

Though he might easily have soured on the church, Johnson says such struggles have only clarified and strengthened his relationship to Jesus and the church. "For me, the truths of faith are the truths of the heart," he says. That's the sort of religious knowledge that simply can't be challenged on paper. ■

By JEFFERY L. SHELTER WITH
MIKE THARP AND JILL JORDAN SEIDER