

JESUS OF NAZARETH, NORM FOR THE CHURCH

I take the topic assigned to me as a base for our christological reflection, "Jesus as the norm of the Church," to be an attempt to focus our conversations here, and I will try to honor this focus. However, even this limited topic has at least two major methodological problems to contend with: (1) to what extent can we be assured that our understanding of the Jesus of Nazareth is accurate, and (2) how can we restrict the discussion to the Jesus of two thousand years ago and prescind from Christian belief in the continuing human existence of Jesus as the risen Christ. With respect to the first problem, the historical reality of Jesus, limitation of time will require me to make choices among competing scholarly reconstructions of Jesus' life and activity and to do so without giving detailed arguments for my choices. Anyone familiar with the volume of recent publication about Jesus of Nazareth knows the extent to which even the most careful studies are subject to challenge by other competent experts. However, I believe that we share the judgment that attempts to deal with Jesus of Nazareth should employ the very best critical procedures, procedures that themselves must be subjected to constant criticism. Regarding the second issue I can only say that to the extent possible I will focus on Jesus of Nazareth—and let me say at this point that I will be using the term "Jesus of Nazareth" to refer to that historical individual in his actual earthly career and experience. I believe that after essays like John Meier's in *Theological Studies*,¹ we can proceed without too much haste about terms such as "the historical Jesus." Hopefully my use of the term "Jesus of Nazareth" can skirt that issue.

As you will see, I find it virtually impossible to avoid rather frequent reference to two thousand years of Christians' faith relationship to the risen Christ, for Christians' faith relatedness is to the risen Lord and not as such to the Jesus of two thousand years ago. Again, to reveal my own presuppositions, let me state at the very beginning my position regarding the resurrection as it touches Jesus himself: As far as I can see, mainstream Christian faith has consistently maintained that in some fashion Jesus of Nazareth continues to exist humanly and is present to the community of believers. I am aware that this understanding of Jesus risen is not universally shared among Christian exegetes and theologians today, but it is the presupposition for my remarks in this paper.

In good trinitarian fashion I will deal with three topics. (1) The *memory* of Jesus has been a constant force in the faith awareness and life of the Christian

¹J. Meier, "The Historical Jesus: Rethinking Some Concepts," *Theological Studies* 51 (1990) 3-24.

community during the past two thousand years and remains such today. (2) God's Word, uttered in Jesus as God's parable, continues to function as a normative *word of revelation* in the life of the Church. (3) The lines of force by which God's Spirit worked in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth provide the guideline for our own Christian life and ministry. I will add to this, in extremely brief fashion, my understanding of what it means to call Jesus the founder of Christianity.

1. *The memory of Jesus as normative.* It is a constant element of our experience that the memory of great persons, or the memory of persons close and dear to us, continues to influence us long after their death. Such memories touch our awareness of ourselves, affect the meaning we find in human life, inspire us to embrace certain ideals, and motivate us to certain courses of action. If recent TV programming is any indication, the memory of Martin Luther King or Robert Kennedy or Malcolm X continues to fascinate and attract millions of our fellow citizens. Certainly for millions of idealistic people the memory of the Central American martyrs works to shape their understanding of life and of what it means to be a dedicated and caring human being, and it alerts people to the power politics, shared by our nation, that oppress the poor of the earth. Hopefully that memory works also to help people evaluate the priorities governing our society, recognize the incompatibility of such oppression with Christian faith, and one day take effective action to bring about justice and peace. Such influential memories are intensified if the person in question had died in some heroic fashion, though the full resonance of their action is often difficult to define—as is the case with the memories that flood in for veterans visiting the Vietnam memorial in Washington.

For devoted Christians the memory of Jesus of Nazareth exercises a special role. It is the memory of a teacher and prophet sent from God to help guide humans to their destiny; it is the memory of a great human who faced public repudiation and criminal execution rather than betray his witness to truth; but more than that it is the memory of a beloved friend. This added element of deep human affection is reflected in the New Testament, especially in the Johannine tradition. Mary of Magdala is not the only one to refer to Jesus as "the Master" in a way that implies the warmth of deep friendship. Clearly, these early disciples of Jesus regarded his teaching and his example as normative of their own understandings, attitudes and activity. The very emergence of gospels testifies to the way in which Christians' own existence as individuals and as communities of faith was given intelligibility through reflection on the person and career of Jesus.

But such deeply human resonance with the remembered Jesus is not a phenomenon limited to those who had experienced Jesus himself in his historical existence. Christian history is replete with examples: references to Jesus in the patristic sermons and baptismal catecheses, the warm human relatedness to Christ of women like Julian of Norwich or Margery Kempe or Teresa of Avila, or of

men like Bernard of Clairvaux or Francis of Assisi or William Langland, or the devoted reflection on the mysteries of Jesus' life and death and resurrection that characterize Loyola's Spiritual Exercises. In our own day, even nonreligious media whose historical accuracy could certainly be questioned still draw from this memory images both consoling and disturbing—Pasolini's "Gospel according to Matthew" or the more recent film "Jesus of Montreal," and perhaps most touchingly "Godspell." Somehow, recollections of this man, no matter how uncritical or even slanted their presentation, stir people and make it clear that beneath the surface of our human lives his memory still functions as an exemplar of what human life could and should be.

The memory of one not dead. All that we have said about Christians' remembrance of Jesus needs to be modified by the central element of Christian belief: Jesus is not dead, he is alive. This human figure, Jesus of Nazareth is not simply someone of the past who is still with us in our cherished memories of him. Instead, he, the same Jesus of Nazareth is believed by Christians to have passed through death into new human life, new life beyond the limitations of our space and time—a context of human existence that enables him to be present to people no matter where or when they are. The very notion of the Church, the community of believers, as "body of Christ" rests on the assumption that the ancient kerygma is true: "this Jesus of Nazareth whom your leaders put to death, he is not dead, he is alive and is Messiah and Lord."² Paul made clear to the Corinthian community the centrality of this belief, "if Christ be not risen, our faith is vain."³

Our memory of who and what Jesus of Nazareth *was* is an intrinsic element of our faith awareness of who and what he now *is*. The flip side of this is that Christians' belief today in the presence to them of the living Christ modifies in any number of ways their memory of Jesus' earthly life and death.

As generation after generation passed, there was the normal tendency to legendize the memory of the hero; and in the case of Jesus, because of the Christian faith that somehow Jesus' person touched the realm of the divine, mythic elements also entered the picture as early as the Gospels themselves. Along with this, various cultural contexts began to affect the manner in which Christians remembered the career and teaching of Jesus. As we all know, comparative studies of the Gospels themselves indicate the influence on the recollection of Jesus exerted by differing questions and problems in the communities that produced the Gospels. And even though the Greco-Roman "translation" of the Christ-mystery rather early gained a monopoly on acceptable descriptions of Jesus, cultural reinterpretation of Christians' memories of Jesus continued as the West itself underwent evolution over the centuries. Not only were elements

²Acts 2:22-34.

³1 Cor 15:12-19.

inserted into this memory, not only did the legendizing continue in teaching and liturgy and art, but some of what Jesus had been and done was conveniently forgotten or overlooked because it conflicted with the ideologies that controlled various historical periods.

In a way it could not have been otherwise. If we are to consider Jesus as the fulfillment of what "human" is all about, that consideration is governed by what it means to be human for us in a definite cultural context at a particular point in history. If we are to honor Chalcedon's "true human, consubstantial with us in humanity," then Jesus must have been whatever it means for us to be truly human. So, if different cultures have understood differently what "human" means, they could not but remember Jesus in somewhat different ways. True, such differing memories would have always been formed by the Gospel narratives of a Jesus who lived as a Galilean in second-Temple Judaism, but until quite recently there was relatively little ability to discover how being human in Jesus' cultural milieu differed from peoples' assumption that "human" meant what they were.

Even within a particular cultural setting, Rome for example, there was not complete consistency in the way the memory of Jesus was handed on by various media—official doctrine, folk recollection, official and popular ritual, or iconography. Liturgy and popular devotion sometimes retain what theology and doctrine have forgotten or neglected. A historical witness to this tension came in the iconoclastic controversies, both those of the ninth century and those at the time of the Protestant Reformation, when the validity of pictorial remembrance of Jesus was challenged as inconsistent with accurate theology about Jesus. Again, we might note that this tension is to be expected, for—to take but one instance—*theology*, precisely because it is *theology*, cannot but emphasize transcendent dimensions of the Christ-mystery; whereas liturgy, because it is privileged point of contact between God and the daily lives of humans, logically stresses the here-and-now presence of Christ.

Because all these various influences can distort the memory of Jesus, sometimes rather seriously, there is a constant need to examine and, if needed, correct or supplement what claims to be the "tradition" about Jesus. To take but one example: how justified is the way in which the notion of "kingship" has been applied to Jesus? Certainly, whenever kingship was attributed to Jesus there were avowals that his kingship was unique; yet, there was a subtle implication that power structures in the Church that were characterized as "monarchical" were grounded in Jesus' kingship. In recent times, the constant need to subject such understandings to a "return to sources" has been immensely aided by the development of critical historical and textual methods, methods that have allowed us to recreate as never before the reality of Jesus' life and activity.⁴

⁴On recent christological developments and the impact of critical studies, cf. M. Hellwig, "Reemergence of the Human, Critical, Public Jesus," *Theological Studies* 50 (1989) 466-80.

This is all too familiar to you. I would like to point to another centuries-long effort to test Christians' memory of Jesus against the realities of his life. This is the enduring desire and felt need of devout Christians, ordinary believing people, to contact as far as possible the "real Jesus" by pilgrimage to the places where he lived and ministered. Anyone who has had the opportunity to journey to Palestine, to walk along the shores of the Sea of Galilee or follow the "via dolorosa" through Jerusalem's narrow winding streets, knows the unparalleled sense of Jesus' historical reality that comes with visiting the places where he actually lived. And even if one cannot actually visit Palestine, one can sense the enduring impact of these holy places if one reads the baptismal catechesis of Cyril of Jerusalem and hears him tell the catechumens how they can go down to see the place where Jesus was executed. One can imagine, too, the sense of contact with Jesus of Nazareth that came for thirteenth-century Christians when Louis of France enshrined in the Sainte Chapelle the supposedly authentic crown of thorns.

Beneath all this shifting memory of Jesus of Nazareth there is one lasting and all-important remembrance: *there was a Jesus of Nazareth who was (and is) one of us*. Much as we treasure the wisdom of Jesus' teaching, Christianity is not most basically a tradition of wisdom teaching; it is the acceptance of a historical personage and of the sequence of historical happenings through which God working in this Jesus offered salvation for the human race. For Christians faith is the personal acceptance of this Jesus as Savior. Jesus is "Holy Wisdom," but he is divine Wisdom embodied. For this reason, the memory of Jesus, in so far as we can purify and carefully amplify it, is always a challenge to our beliefs about him. Our belief must always be revised in order to conform more accurately to what he was and in the vision of Easter faith now is. And if that memory governs our belief about this Jesus as the Christ, then it also guides normatively our understanding of ourselves as Church and our activity as disciples of this Jesus.

2. *Jesus' continuing function as Word*. To move on, then, to my second point, the manner in which Jesus of Nazareth has continued to be Word of revelation and of creation throughout the Church's history. What we have said so far lays on us as disciples and friends a responsibility of fidelity to his teaching and example. However, a more profound element of his normative role enters the picture when we accept the ancient and traditional belief that this Jesus of Nazareth, *precisely as this Jesus of Nazareth*, is in distinctive fashion God's own creative Word.

In talking about Jesus as divine Word, I think it important to sustain, as far as possible, the more *functional* approach to thinking about the divine that characterized the religious traditions of Israel and that characterized Jesus' own Galilean/Jewish understanding of God. That such an emphasis on the functional understanding of *logos* is not only biblically accurate but relevant to our contemporary ways of thinking has been recently highlighted by George Tavard when he suggested translating the Johannine *logos* as "discourse" and then linked this

to elements of present-day communication theory.⁵ For Israelite faith, Yahweh was the God who acted and made self known in the events of their history. As for New Testament usage, recent study has come to near consensus that for Jesus the term "the kingdom of God" meant "God's reign," the continuing saving action of God in the history of his people.⁶ Jews of Jesus' day, including Jesus himself, stressed the question "What is God doing?" rather than the more typically Greek philosophical question "What kind of being is God?"

God's Word, then, is God's continuing self-gift in self-revelation; it is not an aspect of God but rather, to use our inadequate human way of speaking, an activity of God. Jesus' human existing embodied this divine activity; his existing as this distinctive human, Jesus of Nazareth, was God's speaking, God's revealing of self incarnated. This divine speaking did not begin *with* Jesus of Nazareth—the early verses of the epistle to the Hebrews makes this point explicitly—but in some way this centuries-long divine activity came to focus and realization in Jesus. While this points to a unique role in salvation history, it also places the historical Jesus of Nazareth in the broader context of the divine self-revelation that embraces the totality of God's self-giving in creation and human history.

The divine Logos works in the entirety of created reality, and though Jesus is this Logos, his human embodiment of God's Word is not by itself the only created expression of that Word. All that is, and especially all that is truly human, exists as sacrament of God's creatively loving presence.⁷ This is not to detract from Jesus' uniqueness, for in unparalleled fashion his life in the Galilee of two thousand years ago was acknowledgement of the God who truly is, that is to say it was priestly worship in the most basic sense. Who he was and what he did as Jesus of Nazareth sacramentalized, more than that it *incarnated*, God's self-communicating Word.

As early as the traditions that led to the Gospels, Christianity has seen Jesus of Nazareth continuing the word of revelation spoken in the history of Israel. In a special way it has seen the continuity linking Jesus with the great charismatic prophets of the Israelite dispensation. But as the first decades of Christian reflection wrestled with the "something more" that characterized Jesus they went beyond seeing him as the ideal prophet, the eschatological prophet, the embodiment of the history of prophetism, and came to view him as the very Word itself. While in various ways the lives as well as the oracles of Israel's prophets pointed

⁵G. Tvard, *The Vision of the Trinity* (Washington DC: University Press of America, 1981).

⁶Cf. N. Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia PA: Fortress Press, 1976).

⁷This involves more than the sustaining action of God, which, obviously, must be coextensive with created reality. Creation is radically a divine *self-sharing* which can only find realization in personal presence to people of faith.

symbolically to the God worshiped by the people, Jesus' life in all its facets was truly God's parable, a parable that spoke in living metaphor not only about God but also about the struggle of God's love in the encounter with reluctant human freedom.

If this is true, then only the concrete reality of Jesus of Nazareth is God's unique Word—not any interpretation or explanation or description. Not even the privileged witness of the New Testament literature, important a word to faith as it is, is the primary word of revelation, for beneath it lies the disciples' experience of Jesus and beneath that lies the reality of the Jesus they experienced. What grounds all the explanations and interpretations of Jesus is the reality of Jesus. But I believe that we must take yet another step: beneath the actual experience of Jesus lay the functioning of the divine Word which even Jesus could not understand without interpreting it in his own cultural context. Even for Jesus' privileged consciousness of God and of being God's Son, God and God's self-revealing Word which he was did not cease to be mystery. The heuristic moment of our theological reflection cannot stop with Jesus of Nazareth but must go beyond, to the divine mystery in itself, but it cannot faithfully go beyond and in doing so ignore this Jesus who still now functions as God's self-revealing Word.

The inexhaustible mystery that Christians have pondered for two millenia and which today defies our attempts to grasp it as fully and clearly as we wish is none other than what God did and does in this human who lived and died as one of us and passed through death into the fulfillment of human existence that we hope to share as our destiny. So, if the Christian community, the Church, seeks to understand God a bit less inaccurately and relate to this God a bit more faithfully, that understanding and devotion must be grounded in and criticized by the real Jesus of Nazareth. Trying to discover who and what he was is the ultimate "return to sources." The gospel that Jesus preached by his very being remains as a challenge to the faith of the Church; it is always a challenge to conversion; *ecclesia semper reformanda*.

The real Jesus of Nazareth was the locus of the divine saving presence to human history; he was *Emmanuel*, and he was that precisely in his human self-giving, in his own personal presence to those with whom he associated, in his sharing of his and his Abba's Spirit with those he encountered. This sharing continues in the life of the Church and obviously adds an important element to the memory of Jesus we earlier discussed. One significant aspect of the Word that God spoke in Jesus is that this Word was spoken in and through the experiences that made up the life of Jesus. Recalling those experiences reveals the dynamics of divine-human interaction that continue today. For example, the frustrations that Jesus faced in his prophetic ministry spoke of humans' capacity to frustrate the saving influence of God's Spirit, for Jesus' uncompromising sharing of his insight into God and his loving concern for people was limited by the extent of his auditors' openness to him. The less than desirable response to the Gospel that

Jesus experienced was a manifestation of the limitation placed by creatures on the unlimited divine gifts of truth, love and existence.⁸

To make the transition to the Church of today—the risen Christ's functioning as God's Word today cannot be essentially different from his being God's Word as Jesus of Nazareth. Indeed, the Word he was then remains the privileged window into the mystery of the transcendent God we seek and worship. Hence, the importance, difficult as the task is, of reaching back to discover the reality of Jesus, the prophet from Galilee, so that he can continue to function for us as God's own Word.

To add one element, only briefly, for it is an immense topic in itself. The continuing function in history of Christ as the divine Word occurs obliquely, perhaps it would be more accurate to say "sacramentally," in the lives of those faith-filled disciples who reflect and translate Christ's self-giving and transforming presence to them. They are, in the words often repeated in patristic literature, "images of the *Imago Dei*." They are the exemplary "hearers of the Word," through whom the risen Christ can continue to communicate the divine self-giving. Examining this historical process of Jesus functioning in resurrection as Word, present to those of faith, is central to the largely unaccomplished task of constructing a *Christology*. And coming to appreciate the word spoken in the life of the Church is itself intrinsic to the discovery of Jesus of Nazareth, for the experience of authentic Christian faith is a hermeneutic that enables us to discover the deeper dimensions of the career of Jesus of Nazareth as it did for those early disciples who produced the New Testament literature.

To summarize what I have been trying to say about Jesus functioning as Word: hearing accurately the Word that Jesus was and is functions normatively to enrich and critique the faith of the Christian community, for the hope and worship of that community are directed to the God revealed in Jesus. We do not have any other God than the God Jesus called "Abba." Christianity's image of God, its naming of God, its worship of God stand always under judgment by Jesus' experience of God. To move on, then, to my third point:

3. *God's action in Jesus through their shared Spirit.* One thing that careful study of the New Testament has taught us is that the christological perspective of the early Church was clearly *theological*—they viewed the events that consti-

⁸Most basically, God's creative contribution to created reality is the continuing "gift" of existing, existing that in itself is fuller than created reality can express. Creatures' contribution to this process is precisely limitation, formation that involves definition/limitation/identity-distinct-from-God. The dynamic reality of existing always struggles against such limitation; existing has a finalistic thrust toward greater expression. This is the source of ongoing evolution and of evolving history. At the personal level of creation this is a question of Truth/Word trying to find more enlightening and life-giving expression to consciousness and Love pushing towards union-in-distinctiveness, towards the openness to receiving divine love that is creation's main manifestation of love of God.

tuted Jesus' human career as God's activity in and through Jesus. God has saved us in Jesus as the Christ. John's Gospel, for instance, recognizes this by having Jesus say "The Son can do nothing by himself; he does only what he sees the Father doing; what the Father does the Son does." (5:19) More general is the insight shared by all the traditions that the empowerment of Jesus to function as prophet and healer comes from God's own healing and life-giving Spirit.

In speaking this way, we are again forced to situate Jesus' ministry in the broader context of God's activity in the whole of creation and history, for the mystery of God's creative Spirit pervades the whole dispensation of divine loving self-gift. There may well be a unique and paradigmatic enspiriting of Jesus, but the mission of God's Spirit is not limited to this human. Having said that, we need immediately to make a most important qualification: it would be correct to see God's Spirit working in a context wider than the influence of the risen Christ were it not for the fact of Jesus' own relatedness to that wider context. Jesus' own existing and identity as the risen Christ involves a relatedness to all other humans; he is truly the human for all others. His risen existence makes sense only in terms of his sharing with his brothers and sisters that Spirit by which he lives—that is the basic finality of his Passover, without that purpose resurrection as it now is could not be. While the manifestation, the "contact" if you will, of God's creative Spirit working in Jesus was severely limited during Jesus' earthly lifetime by the bounds of space and time, that limitation no longer prevails after Jesus' death, at least as far as the Christ himself is concerned.

At this point let me break the logic of my treatment, for, even though it is not the focus of my paper, some mention should be made to recent efforts to develop a Spirit Christology.⁹ This is not the place to describe recent approaches to this issue, much less to debate the advantages of any particular position. However, I believe that four personal observations can be made, observations that may well be challenged in our later discussions:

1. Some of the proposed advocates of a Spirit Christology seem to me to make too great a separation between the functioning of God's Spirit and of God's Word, to make it a matter of either/or. The scriptural perspective, on the contrary, sees the two realities of God's Word and God's Spirit as inseparably interdependent. No doubt theological reflection has neglected the role played by God's Spirit in the person and career of Jesus and in the continuing soteriological role of the risen Christ; but this function of the Spirit needs to be integrated with classic Logos Christology rather than treated as an alternative or a complement.

2. While it is true that the scriptural view of God's Spirit stresses the notion of God's outreaching, creative power, the same can be said in slightly different

⁹E.g., P. Rosato, "Spirit Christology: Ambiguity and Promise," *Theological Studies* 38 (1977) 423-46; D. Coffey, "A Proper Mission of the Holy Spirit," *Theological Studies* 47 (1986) 227-50.

fashion of the biblical theologies of God's Word. That divine Word is proclamation, but it is also creatively effective of what is proclaimed. "God said, let there be light; and there was light." It is word of command, but as revelation unfolds it becomes clear that it is more appropriate to call it word of invitation, for the heart of the word spoken is the Word of God's self-giving love—and at that point we are dealing with God's Spirit of creative love, for it is the granting of that Spirit that speaks God's self-gift.

3. Use of language such as describing God's Spirit as the intermediary linking Father and Son can be misunderstood to suggest a need to bridge the distinction between them by the Spirit—the image can be that of a bridge, and a bridge implies a gap that needs to be bridged. However, the implication of New Testament texts is that there is a total coincidence of Father and Son in the one Spirit. The Spirit that sources Jesus' own human existing, impels and empowers him to healing ministry, and that which animates him in risen existence is God's own Spirit.

4. It seems to me that, quite understandably, there has been the tendency to read back into the early Christian understandings the insistence on Spirit being a distinct hypostasis that characterizes the fourth and fifth century trinitarian disputes. Have we not come to treat God's Spirit as a third divine "someone"? Have we not somewhat forgotten that "the Holy Spirit" is none other than Christ's Spirit at the same time that this Spirit is God's Spirit?

This Spirit, Christ's Spirit, continues to work in history, specifically in the lives of the faithful who make up the Church, empowering them as disciples to cominister with Christ to the emergence of God's kingdom. But this movement of Christ's Spirit, of God's Spirit in Christ is not basically different in its direction, in its eschatological orientation, than it was in the earthly career of Jesus, so that that empowerment and Spirit-guidance of Jesus of Nazareth provides normative insight for the Christian community as it tries in each period of history to discern the impulse of God's Spirit in its life. In trying to get some grasp on the reality of this, I have found it helpful to use the notion of "trajectory" that has proven fruitful in recent study of the New Testament and early Christianity.

The notion of trajectory, for example in the case of a shell shot from a cannon, implies that the forces that will bring the shell to its target are already at work as the shell leaves the gun's muzzle, and implies also that if one were able at that moment to know all those forces as well as the elements against which the shell would have to work as it moved towards the target, one would be able to predict the path, the trajectory, of the shell. Applying this to the case at hand: if one could discover the entirety of the divine force at work in Jesus as his earthly life passed into resurrection, one would know the eschatological orientation of God's Spirit as it invited humanity towards its destiny. And it is precisely this orientation, to the extent to which we can discover it, that is ultimate norm for our existence and behavior as individual Christians and corporately as the Church.

Clearly, this is not a new idea; every age of the Church has felt the need to discern the movement of Christ's Spirit in its midst. What I wish to highlight is the manner in which the historical career of Jesus is the privileged witness to this trajectory, to the direction in which God's Spirit is working to lead reluctant humanity to its destiny, a direction that we as the Church must honor as the guide for our own decision making and ministry. Whatever we truly contribute to the betterment of human life, to realization of the reign of God, cannot be other than sacramentalization of God's own Spirit at work in history.

But it is not just that the historical reality of Jesus of Nazareth points the direction in which our activities of evangelizing and healing must move. Observing the Spirit's creative power working in Jesus tells us also the *manner* in which that Spirit continues to move in our lives. Both Old Testament and New Testament Scriptures see God's Spirit as God's *power*, the power of creation, the power of life, the power of loving self-gift that produces both new being and new life. It is this divine *dunamis* that, as we saw, worked in Jesus, sourcing his very existence as a human, leading him to his public ministry and empowering him to teach and heal as prophet and legate of Wisdom.

However—and the point needs stressing—this divine power is radically other than the power by which humans ordinarily try to shape their lives and their history. Jesus of Nazareth possessed neither economic nor political nor official religious power; in those realms he was an ordinary human, one of the powerless of the earth. More importantly, he explicitly rejected any such power as the means by which to bring about the reign of his Abba. As he teaches his disciples (in the twentieth chapter of Matthew) the rulers of civil society govern by domination, but it is not to be so in his kingdom. Instead, he will have power in the lives of people precisely by his loving them and by his witness to truth, even unto death. It could not be otherwise if he was to be faithful to the Spirit that his Abba shared with him, for that was God's creative love, the Spirit of truth.

Clearly, at this point we encounter one of the most important challenges posed by Jesus of Nazareth to the institutionalizing of the Church: how is power exercised in the Church? That some institutional elements must be part of the Church's historical existence is obvious; the question is: which institutions? Among these institutional elements, there must be some forms of structuring and governing the activities of Christian communities. Paul's letters already make it clear that such governing of communities is itself meant to be rooted in the activity of Christ's Spirit, for true Christian governing is itself a charism.¹⁰ Having said that, we must also insist that such governing is not meant to be domination, not meant to divide the Christian community into powerful and powerless, not meant to control lives and faith by fear or ambition or ideological repression or distortions of truth. That such perversions of power have occurred

¹⁰Rom 12:7.

in the Church's life needs no proof; perhaps it was inevitable that some of this occur—to underline their existence is not my purpose. What needs to be said clearly is that such an abusive understanding and exercise of power can find no support in the career of Jesus—the Spirit of God did not move him in this way to effect the salvation of humanity; and the Spirit's movement today in the Church is not other than it was in Jesus.

In summary, then, I believe we can say that Jesus of Nazareth in his human existing and activity is normative for the Church's understanding of God and therefore of its faith and worship, normative of the Church's ministry as it works to bring about God's reign, and normative of the institutions by which faith and hope and love are served and nourished throughout history. To know the real Jesus of Nazareth is to know more deeply and more accurately what we are meant to be as Christians.

Finally, what does it mean to say that Jesus of Nazareth is "the founder of the Church," a question that is much discussed today as we compare Christianity to other great world religions and Jesus to figures like Mohammed or Gautama the Buddha. I believe that critical study of the New Testament indicates that Jesus of Nazareth had no intention of starting a new religion, nor did the earliest Christians see him a starting a new religion—indeed, Christianity is not to be a religion, even though worship of the God revealed in Jesus is central to its existence. Jesus, I believe, understood his mission as one of fulfilling what his Abba, the God of Israel, had for centuries been doing. And with the breakthrough experience of Easter, the primitive Church realized that what had begun with Jesus was not a new religion, but a new humanity, indeed a new creation. Christianity is meant to be a new way of being human, a way of being human that is governed by the truth revealed in Jesus and empowered by God's Spirit of love in our midst. Such a humanity, such a Church, is still a dream, but Acts 2 tells us that with the gift of Spirit we are to dream such dreams, the same dreams that animated Jesus of Nazareth. To the extent that we effectively share those dreams, Jesus will be normative of the Church in our day.

Jesus founded the Church by freely and unreservedly, in his life and in his dying, opening himself to God's self-gift in Word and Spirit. From that living and dying there emerged a transformed humanity shaped by that Word and animated by that Spirit; and there emerged a community of believers dedicated in faith and discipleship to bringing about that new humanity.

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