

## JESUS AS THE NORM OF THE CHURCH

### A Response to Bernard Cooke

It is a privilege and an honor to participate in this theological discussion with Bernard Cooke from whom I and most of us have learned so much over the years. As you know, we will have the opportunity this year for a follow-up discussion on Sunday morning. Prof. Cooke has gotten us off to a fine start with his careful and lucid presentation this morning. I will contribute some reactions of my own which I hope will stimulate the discussion. Let me first summarize briefly the main points of Cooke's presentation.

#### SUMMARY

He has focused our attention on three points: First, the memory of Jesus of Nazareth in his actual earthly career and experience has been and continues to be normative for the Christian community today. That memory has been modified by the central Christian belief that Jesus lives and is present to us today. But the memory has been differentiated by the various cultural and historical contexts through which it has been passed on. There is not one memory of Jesus, but there are *memories*. Some aspects of Jesus memories have been lost and some have been distorted. There is a constant need for Christians to test their memories against the realities of his life, insofar as these can be retrieved by critical historical scholarship.

Secondly, Jesus, precisely as Jesus of Nazareth, continues to be normative in his function as God's creative and revealing Word. This is the continuation of God's self-revelation in the history of Israel, but for Christians, God's Word was actually incarnated in the concrete reality of Jesus of Nazareth. That reality governs and judges our understanding of the ultimate Mystery. It also judges and challenges the Church.

Thirdly, Cooke reminded us that God's action in Jesus continues through their shared Spirit. While the Spirit's working in and through Jesus was limited by bounds of space and time during Jesus' earthly life, such limitations no longer prevail in his risen existence. The orientation or trajectory of the continuing action of the Spirit for the Church today is the same as the trajectory of God's activity in the earthly career of Jesus of Nazareth. This is the norm and guide for our own decision making and ministry. The Spirit's creative power working in Jesus of Nazareth also shows us the *manner* in which the Spirit continues to work in the Church, judging and challenging the way power is exercised in the Church.

In summary, Cooke argued that "Jesus of Nazareth in his human existing and activity is normative for the Church's understanding of God . . . of the Church's ministry . . . and normative of the institutions" which serve the Kingdom of God in history.

#### RESPONSE

I find myself in basic agreement with his thesis. Hence, by way of response I would like to add emphasis and some specificity to what Cooke has said.

By way of emphasis—every time I hear the term "memory of Jesus" I am reminded of the two adjectives with which Johannes Baptist Metz modified it some years ago—"dangerous" and "subversive." The memory of Jesus of Nazareth is and ought to be a dangerous and subversive memory, for the Church and for society as a whole. Metz said, "This definite memory breaks through the magic circle of the prevailing consciousness. . . . It gives rise again and again to the suspicion that the plausible structures of a society may be relationships aimed to delude."<sup>1</sup> This memory is dangerous because it challenges our taken-for-granted certainties, our self-deluding good intentions, and the motivations for our seemingly good actions. But it is also subversive (to subvert means to overturn from below) to the power structures of society, to the status quo, and to any forms of exploitation or oppression. (In March I was in El Salvador where it is very clear that the memory of Jesus is seen as subversive; it was certainly dangerous to all those who have been killed in that land of The Savior.) Perhaps we need to ask ourselves that, if the memory of Jesus which we preserve and proclaim is not seen as dangerous and subversive to any one or any structure, then maybe we haven't got it right?

But can we get it right? Can we retrieve a memory of the earthly Jesus of Nazareth that is historically reliable enough for it to be a guiding norm for the life of the Christian community? In the last fifteen to twenty years, life-of-Jesus research has had more confidence that the New Testament yields significant historical data. I would like to specify and test Cooke's thesis by proposing a portrait of the earthly Jesus and drawing out some implications were it to be the guiding norm for the Church. My intent here is to stimulate and focus our discussion, rather than to argue that this is the only historically reliable sketch. For there is not only one memory of Jesus even in the New Testament. But our memories are joggled by our own situation, and we still need to answer for ourselves the question "Who do you say that I am?" Considering our historical and social context, let me propose one recent memory of the pre-Easter Jesus—that sketched out by Marcus Borg.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Johannes Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. David Smith (New York: Crossroad, 1980) 90.

<sup>2</sup>Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus A New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987) and *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical*

Borg suggests that two words tell us what was most important about the earthly Jesus: *Spirit* and *Compassion*. Jesus was a Spirit-filled person (the older term was holy man), a person who has an experiential awareness of the sacred, of God. Spirit persons are known cross-culturally. They are persons who have a "strong sense of there being more to reality than the tangible world of our ordinary experience" and "they become mediators of the sacred" by speaking the word or will of God or mediating the power of God through healings and exorcisms. Jesus did both. Borg argues that "From his baptism onward, through his ordeal in the wilderness, and continuing throughout his ministry, his life and mission were marked by an intense experiential relationship to the Spirit."

Jesus was also a sage, a teacher of wisdom; not the conventional wisdom of his culture but an alternative wisdom that was subversive of the taken-for-granted way of seeing and doing things. He taught as "one having authority" which, according to Borg, "is best understood as flowing out of his own spiritual experience." So Jesus was a man who knew God personally and experientially, a Spirit person.

The second key word for Borg's sketch of Jesus of Nazareth is compassion. He argues that "The stories told about Jesus speak of him as having compassion and of his being moved with compassion. The word also represents the summation of his teaching about both God and ethics. For Jesus, compassion was the central quality of God and the central moral quality of a life centered in God," crystallized in the single verse, "Be compassionate as God is compassionate." (Luke 6:36)

But "compassion was more than a quality of God and an individual virtue: it was a social paradigm, the core value for life in community" which directly challenged and overturned the dominant social system. The integrated religious and political system of first century Palestine stressed "sharp social boundaries between pure and impure, righteous and sinner, whole and not whole, male and female, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile," what Borg terms the "ethos and politics of purity." In contrast, Jesus preached and exemplified an "ethos of compassion." There are many examples of this but the most obvious is Jesus' open and inclusive table fellowship.<sup>3</sup> He ate and drank with publicans and sinners. His followers included both male and female, tax collectors and beggars. The movement Jesus founded was one of radical equality and inclusiveness.

Thus, in Borg's sketch the earthly Jesus was a person of Spirit and a person of compassion and these were both rooted in his own experiential awareness of the God he called Abba. Borg's sketch is only one among scholars engaged in the so-called "third quest" for the historical Jesus; others might be proposed. But

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*Jesus & the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994).

<sup>3</sup>The offense caused by Jesus' acceptance of tax collectors and sinners and his apparent violation of purity codes is an area of some dispute among N.T. scholars. For an alternative to Borg's position, see E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 174-211, esp. 209-11.

if such a memory of Jesus of Nazareth were our guiding norm, what would be the consequences for the community called Church and its mission in the world? Let me suggest just a few.

First, if Jesus was a Spirit-filled person, does not that suggest that we too, his disciples, should also personally experience the sacred, God, and does that not restore the centrality of prayer, meditation, and the mystical element to Christianity? (This is an element which some feel has been lost or at least downplayed in the concern of mainline churches for issues of social justice and human welfare.)

Second, if Jesus was a person of the Spirit and there have been other Spirit persons in other cultural traditions, wouldn't that provide Christians with some firm basis for the common pursuit and sharing of spiritual experiences, for interreligious dialogue, and all that that entails for Christology and for the self-understanding of the Christian community? Although Borg himself is willing to deny that Jesus is "the uniquely and exclusively true revelation of God," I am not willing to agree, at least not yet. But this has become a burning issue which an older memory of Jesus does not adequately address.

Third, if Jesus is a Spirit person who personally experienced the sacred, this challenges and subverts the dominant Western, post-Enlightenment, materialist view which sees reality "as constituted by the world of matter and energy within the space-time continuum" and nothing more. The experience of Spirit persons suggests that there is more to reality, that there is spiritual power and energy active in our world.

Fourth, if Jesus was a person of compassion and if compassion is *the* characteristic of God and the paradigm for social and communal life, then the Church too should be a community of compassion and solidarity with all those marginalized or excluded by social status, poverty, by reason of gender, race, or ethnic origin. It would truly be an inclusive community of radical equality and would seek to build a society on the ethos of compassion, not on individual achievement.

There are obviously other implications for our communal life as Christians which could be drawn out but these will suffice for now. Such a specific sketch of the earthly Jesus of Nazareth would provide us with a guiding norm that is clearly at odds with the conventional wisdom prevailing in our society and in our Church. The memory of Jesus of Nazareth truly is and ought to be dangerous and subversive. Do we have the courage to let it be our guiding norm?

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