Response to Luke Timothy Johnson's
The Real Jesus

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According to the preface, a major purpose of Luke Timothy Johnson's book *The Real Jesus* is "to sort out some of the strands in a moment of complex cultural confusion" (pp. v–vi). He sees the Jesus Seminar as a symptom of institutional collapse, characterized by the effort of scholars to bypass the ordinary contexts of their activity in order to effect cultural change by direct competition with conservative Christians; the ambiguous role of the media as the arena for this cultural battle; and especially the battle over identity boundaries within Christianity itself. He also addresses the classic philosophical and theological problem of the connection between history and faith, since it is a major factor in the current controversy. In my response, I would like to address these two main points briefly.

The "battle over identity boundaries within Christianity itself " from Johnson's perspective evidently includes ambiguity in the role of scholar-teacher. He is puzzled by Marcus Borg's "desire to be both a critical historian and a builder of Christian faith" (p. 41). He asks, if Borg is a Christian, why should it matter to him if the New Testament retrojected divine qualities back onto Jesus? Conversely, if he is a critical historian, why should he worry whether the historical Jesus is irrelevant to the faith? Johnson finds it odd that Borg assumes that "the human vision" of Jesus is to be a norm for "the new vision" that shapes Christian discipleship.

Johnson admits that only in a non-existent "tidy world" could it be the case that the role of builder of Christian faith and the role of critical historian would each have a single social location (p. 58). Nevertheless, such tidy distinctions seem to be his ideal. The builder of Christian faith belongs in the Church and the critical historian in the academy. The present social reality in the United States, however, is one in which the connection between ideologies and social structures is not so neat. As Johnson recognizes, there is a variety of versions of the church and a variety of realizations of the academy.
and they influence each other in complex and ever changing ways. But he views this situation as "the disheveled, distraught, and depressed condition of both Church and academy as American culture slouches toward the millennium" (pp. 58-59).

This theme recurs in the Epilogue, where Johnson presents himself both as a Christian and as a critical scholar and where he explores the possibilities for a "truly critical biblical scholarship within a church that is also faithful to its Lord" (p. 168). This "critical scholarship," however, does not include critical history, in the sense of the reconstruction of the historical Jesus and of the history of the "Jesus movement" and the early Christian movement. This is an odd exclusion. Can a biblical scholar be critical without dealing with issues of historical reconstruction? Can a truly critical scholarship pick and choose what issues and what methods are permissible in light of the Christian faith?

In this context he argues that the church has lost a sense of its boundaries, its self-definition. He claims that leaders in the church have lost "any sense of how the Scripture can function as a basis for debate and decision making in response to crisis" and finds that this loss is due in large measure to the hegemony of the historical critical method (p. 169). He calls for a return from "the academic captivity of the church" and proposes that the place where this change of heart must take place is in seminaries, divinity schools, and schools of theology: "If the church is to be renewed as a community of faith with a distinctive, functional, and flexible mode of discourse, if it is to live by a canon of Scripture and within the rule of faith, then professors within Christian seminaries need to find a way to combine a commitment to tradition with intellectual integrity and freedom. But at the very least, such professors should be willing to make their fundamental commitment to the tradition, and not simply to ever-shifting sands of scholarly fashion" (pp. 169-70).

A major problem with this proposal is that it suggests imposing a loyalty test on professors in such institutions: only those willing to make a commitment to the Christian tradition should teach in them. Further and closely related problems are what "commitment to the Christian tradition" means and whether that tradition is a monolithic unity to which loyalty may be pledged. There is great tension between the idea of such a loyalty test, on the one hand, and the ideals of the academy, on the other. This tension is especially strong in the United States because of our tradition of the separation of Church and State and the related ideal of a secular, or at least neutral university system. Our strong tradition of academic freedom reinforces this tension.
On the other hand, I would agree with Johnson, that "It is entirely appropriate for an interpreter to declare an allegiance to the traditional Christian code as the ideological starting point for his or her interpretation" (p. 175). My agreement is based on several assumptions. One is that every interpreter has some kind of ideological starting point and that it is appropriate and constructive for each interpreter to admit that fact and to clarify what his or hers is. Another is that every interpreter should be self-critical, as well as critical of texts and other interpreters. Finally, whether the ideological starting point is Christian faith, critical history, or something else, all faculty are evaluated for appointment, tenure and promotion in large part on how persuasively they present their views, by providing evidence, warrants and logical argument.

I would like to make a counter-proposal to Johnson's implied loyalty test. Although I am interpreting it in a way he surely did not intend, I take as my starting point a statement made in his discussion of ecclesial hermeneutics. He speaks about the complex texts of human experience being brought into conversation with the complex and often conflicting voices of the normative texts of the tradition: "The diverse voices in the canon are allowed to converse with the diverse voices of contemporary experience" (p. 176). My counter-proposal is simply this: Let no voices be silenced. Let the committed Christian speak alongside the disillusioned Christian, the idiosyncratic Christian, the rationalist, the skeptic, and the critic of one ideology or another. Our students do not need to be protected from any sort of dangerous idea. The freedom to hear every kind of voice will allow them to discover their own.

The other controversial issue treated in this book is the relationship between history and faith. In Chapter Two, "History Challenging Faith," Johnson reviews several recent books on the historical Jesus and concludes that they all share the premise "that historical knowledge is normative for faith, and therefore for theology." A new vision of "the real Jesus" calls the traditional Christian creed into question (p. 55). He challenges this premise, as well as others with roots in the thought of Luther and the Renaissance: that the discovery of origins means the recovery of essence and that any "development" of Christianity must be seen as a decline (p. 68). He raises the question whether history and theology may be discrete modes of knowing (p. 80). But the most important issue for Johnson emerges in his statement that "history—even the best and most critical history—is not the necessary basis of religious faith" (p. 86). These are general philosophical and theological issues. Johnson's position on them is determined, at least in part, by practical considerations that
become clear in Chapter Four, "The Limitations of History." Here his main points are that the reconstruction of the historical development of early Christianity is not possible because there are not enough sources or controls and that the multiple and conflicting hypotheses generated by scholars are just as "mythical" as the traditional Christian ones they seek to supplant (p. 103).

Johnson is certainly right that some hypotheses have been proposed that go beyond the evidence and lack warrants and logical argument to support them. But it is probably the case that all scholars working with early Christian texts have a working hypothesis about the origins and development of the early Christian movement. If that is the case, it is dangerous to declare these issues insoluble or off limits. It is better for scholars to generate and criticize hypotheses in the hope of weeding out the bad ones and establishing ever better ones. Johnson is also right that some hypotheses function "mythically" for some scholars and their audiences in the sense that they provide a story of the founder and of origins which provide them with an identity and a sense of self-esteem. If the hypothesis is unverifiable or unsupported by evidence, this way of establishing identity and self-esteem is precarious. But it seems to me important to point out that there is a major difference between an imaginative filling in of gaps in our historical knowledge that remains on the level of human interaction, on the one hand, and the affirmation of "truths" that are declared to be beyond the realm of historical investigation, on the other. These two types of affirmations are not mythic in the same way.

The heart of the issue for Johnson is evident in the following statement: "Whatever the character of the ministry of Jesus or the 'Jesus movement' before his death, it is the experience of the transformed Jesus as Lord that begins the 'Christian movement.' The resurrection is the necessary and sufficient cause of the religious movement, as well as the literature that it generated and that reveals everywhere the perception of Jesus given by the experience of his transforming power and the conviction that he 'sits on the right hand of God' as Lord" (pp. 135-36). Johnson argues that Christian faith, then as now, is based on religious claims concerning the present power of Jesus (p. 133). He argues that "It is Jesus as risen Lord who is experienced in the assembly of believers, declared by the word of proclamation, encountered in the sacramental meal, addressed by prayers of praise and petition." It is in the name of this Jesus that powerful deeds of healing are performed and believers are transformed from glory into glory. So it was in the first century, and so it is today wherever Christianity is spiritually alive and identifiably Christian in character (p. 142).
Collins has argued that Christian faith and theology are based not on the historical Jesus but on the witness of the apostles. Johnson has argued that this witness is embodied in the *narratives* of the Gospels, not in their pieces and sources, and in the allusions to the story of Jesus as the Christ in the rest of the New Testament. I agree with Johnson that origin is not identical with essence, that development is not necessarily decline, and that there is a typical narrative pattern in the New Testament which interprets Jesus as the Christ. But most twentieth century American Christians are not willing to affirm that their faith is based on a myth or even on a divine reality that lies beyond historical investigation and conclusions. Whereas earlier generations of Christians simply assumed the identity of the earthly Jesus and the risen Christ, historically minded Christians today are aware of the tension between the two and are concerned about the question of continuity.

The question of continuity was raised in the controversies surrounding the movements of Deism and the Enlightenment and it will not go away anytime soon. Did the followers of Jesus foist an interpretation of his life, death and person upon him that had no basis in his own intentions, teaching and deeds? However crude and dated his particular analyses may seem now, the question posed by Reimarus has to be answered by each generation of Christian believers and scholars. The resurrection, or at least the conviction that Jesus was vindicated in spite of his death, may well be a necessary condition for the emergence of the Christian movement, but I doubt that it is a sufficient condition. Unless we think of the resurrection and grace as supernatural events that overwhelm human thinking and willing and bend them willy-nilly to divine purposes, there must have been a basis in the life of Jesus which played a role in the experience of the resurrection and its aftermath. Some Christians may be content simply to posit that basis and the related continuity. But many will feel compelled to investigate the evidence. Some will emphasize continuity and others discontinuity. Must the church, seminaries, divinity schools and schools of theology take a monolithic position on this issue?

Johnson, as a committed Christian, criticizes the Historical Jesus researchers for having as an operative premise that there is no "real Jesus" after his death (p. 144). We need to remind ourselves of the ambiguity and rhetorical flexibility of the phrase "the real Jesus." For some, it means the actual Jesus, the man of flesh and blood who lived in the first century. Everyone (except those few who deny that he ever existed) would accept this application of the phrase, but not all would limit it to this reference. Some use the phrase for the critically reconstructed Jesus of the historian. Others mean by it "the
historic Jesus," that is, Jesus as he is remembered in the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament and as he has had an effective history through the proclamation of the Church (cf. p. 152). Finally, others use it of Jesus as risen Lord as he is experienced in the present, the application favored by Johnson. The actual Jesus of flesh and blood is indeed gone and irrecoverable. The critical reconstruction of the historical Jesus will always be controversial and partial, but we cannot do without it. Johnson is right that the miracle-working of Jesus and his teaching did not become normative in the Church in the way that the story of his loving service, suffering and death for others did. But without the richer, thicker story of the narrative Gospels, this pattern appears a little thin, to say nothing of the psychological and social-ethical problems in taking this pattern as a model for the lives of believers. Once we turn to the Gospels for the more complex and variegated picture of Jesus, however, historical questions arise and the historically minded require answers to these questions. There are as many such questers within the Church as outside it, so it will not do to relegate the task of reconstructing the historical Jesus to the academy. The more the Historical Jesus researcher resists the temptation to reconstruct a Jesus in the image of his or her own cultural ideas, the more fragmentary and strange the resulting picture of Jesus will be. Nevertheless, if the task of reconstruction is abandoned and the methods for accomplishing it that have been devised with so much effort over the last two hundred years are discarded, it will be a loss to the discipline of New Testament studies, to the Church and to society.