2000 Keene Lecture 2

'Jesus and Faith'

Dr Stephen Travis

Foreword by Andrew Knowles, Canon Theologian

The Millennium, when it came, was a year of uncertainties. The Dome was unprofitable, the Bridge was soon closed, and the initial celebrations in London were grid-locked and under-resourced. Jesus Christ was celebrated in *'Seeing Salvation'* - a memorable exhibition at the National Gallery - and in many acts of Christian worship and witness, included a moving and effective ecumenical gathering in our own cathedral on New Year's Eve.

There was a concerted *Jubilee 2000* campaign, urging First World governments to cancel Third World debts. But as the Northern Ireland peace process stalled at Stormont, our transport infrastructure derailed at Ladbroke Grove and *Concorde* crashed near Paris, it was
a time to reflect on the shortcomings and pitfalls of human endeavour rather than the dizzy heights of our achievements. In the Church it felt as though, after the high days of Christendom, we were back to basics: a minority seeking to stand for God against a tidal wave of materialism, self-absorption and fragmentation. The final dispiriting (but symbolic) episode was the closure of Bethlehem for Christmas!

Into this medley of impressions came our Keene lecturers. Their overall theme was *'From Here to Eternity'*: what will endure in this Third Millennium, in terms of faith in the Historical Jesus, his Gospel and his Church? Our speakers were from the Evangelical wing of the church, but not all conservative, ordained, or Anglican. Each in his way revealed a radical streak - a readiness to challenge those traditions which have outlived their usefulness, a rooted confidence in the reality of Jesus Christ, and a quiet assurance that the Gospel is as necessary and relevant for every individual and society as it ever was.

Keene Lecture Two
Jesus and Faith
Dr Stephen Travis

Introduction by Andrew Knowles, Canon Theologian:
Dr Stephen Travis is a New Testament scholar and the Methodist Vice-Principal of an Anglican theological college, St John's Nottingham - a post he has held since 1988. He has the exciting and challenging responsibility of teaching the New Testament to the next generation of preachers, teachers and broadcasters.

Stephen's doctoral thesis was on the controversial subject of Judgement, and it is in this area, and with his books on the Second Coming of Christ, that he has made his name. His most recent title, 'End of Story?' was published by IVP for the Millennium. He is also an enthusiast for communicating the insights of Biblical scholarship to a wider audience, and many who have read his book 'The Bible as a Whole' have wished they had had it to hand many years ago.

Stephen serves as a Methodist local preacher, and is also taking part in the formal Conversations between the Church of England and the Methodist Church.

Thank you. In May this year I was at Heathrow Airport, queueing for the El Al flight to Tel Aviv, where I was to attend a conference. As usual on such a journey, I was interrogated by Israeli security personnel.

'Why are you going to Israel?' she asked. She looked about seventeen, but I've learnt over the years not to underestimate the determination of these people to pursue their line of questioning to the end, or their inability to betray any sense of humour. So I answered straightforwardly: 'I'm going to a conference about Jesus.'

'Why do you need a conference about Jesus? You've had 2000 years to sort out what you think.'

'Well, it's a special conference to think about the significance of Jesus in the year 2000.'

'How long is the conference for?'

'Four days.'

'Four days? Why does it take four days to discuss that?'

Well, why *do* we keep coming back to this question of Jesus - who we think he was, and is, and what he means to us?

Is it because over the years layers of assumption, twists of interpretation, get laid over him, so that he becomes like a jewel covered in dust and grime, whose brilliance we can no longer see? Or like a portrait seen through thick and imperfect glass, so that the image becomes distorted? And how does this come about? Is it through the church's unfaithfulness, or the pressures of our culture which make it hard for us to see those aspects of Jesus which would disturb us, or a natural laziness which domesticates Jesus into someone we feel comfortable with?

Whatever the cause, there is the constant temptation to make Jesus in our own image. Some of you will remember Malcolm Muggeridge's struggle to come to terms with Jesus.

> '*My notion of You, Jesus, was the conventional non-sectarian one of the time - a superlatively good man, gentle and unworldly, who was done to death by the sort of people who voted Conservative and became aldermen or Justices of the Peace. If you were not actually a paid-up member of the Labour Party, it was only because there didn't happen to be a Labour Party in Galilee when you lived there.*'
> (Jesus Rediscovered, p.18).

We could each make our own list of pictures of Jesus which we've come across. And of course we all recognise that it is inevitable, and maybe even appropriate, that we picture Jesus in ways which connect with our own culture and experience - as we see if we look at how portraits of Jesus from

different parts of the world so often attribute to him the facial features and clothing of the artist's country.

Some of you will have seen the pictures that I show you now. Here, you have a Christ of the Masai in East Africa: Christ as one of them. Or a Rasta Christ from the Caribbean. Or in this case a Korean Christ, and on his cross he carries the torn-apart map of North and South Korea. Or, finally, Christ portrayed like a Hindu guru. There's a sense in which we're all inclined to picture Jesus to some extent in our own image.

But we are always in danger of coming under the judgement expressed in William Blake's poem, '*The Everlasting Gospel':*

> 'The vision of Christ that thou dost see
> Is my vision's greatest enemy:
> Thine has a great hooked nose like thine,
> Mine has a snub nose like to mine...
> Both read the Bible day and night,
> But thou read'st black where I read white.'

So why does it matter that we have a true understanding of the Jesus of history, and is it possible anyway?

Why must we take seriously the Jesus of history, who lived in Galilee and in Jerusalem, and not simply focus on the risen Christ, the Christ of the church's creeds and of our experience?

Christians who believe in the incarnation of God in Christ are committed to taking seriously the real humanity of Jesus ... the earthly, and earthy, Jesus of Nazareth.

It is because Christians who believe in the incarnation of God in Christ are committed to taking seriously the real humanity of Jesus. And that means engaging with his earthly life as it really was - so far as we can know that - and not merely relating to him as a vaguely spiritual being, or even being content with standard affirmations of him as 'Lord', or 'Son of God', which can so easily be emptied of real content unless they are rooted in the earthly, and earthy, Jesus of Nazareth.

Let me put this a slightly different way. The early Christians themselves insisted on the identity of the earthly Jesus and the exalted Lord. As Ernst Käsemann insisted in his landmark lecture (20 October 1953) on *'The Problem of the Historical Jesus'*, we cannot do away with the identity between the exalted and the earthly Lord without falling into docetism:

> 'Primitive Christianity is obviously of the opinion that the earthly Jesus cannot be understood otherwise than from the far side of Easter, that is, in his majesty as Lord of the community and that, conversely, the event of Easter cannot be adequately comprehended if it is looked at apart from the earthly Jesus.'
> *(Essays on New Testament Themes, p.25).*

The earthly Jesus and the risen Lord of our creeds and worship and experience have to be held together. We cannot speak of the Christ affirmed in the creeds and celebrated in worship without asking whether the Jesus of history can bear the weight of doctrine which we place upon him. To take an extreme example, it would be impossible to uphold the Christian doctrine of Christ's saving death, the innocent on behalf of the guilty, if Jesus had in fact been guilty of armed robbery. God's risk in committing himself to the incarnation commits us to the risks of historical investigation and to taking seriously its results.

This point hadn't quite been grasped by a university student who said in a late-night discussion, 'Either Jesus was the son of God, or he was a brilliant conman. Either way, I respect him just as much.'

A visit to the historical Jesus supermarket

Once we accept the importance of getting a true picture of the historical Jesus, we find that there are scores of supposedly 'true' pictures of him advocated by one scholar or another. Glance along the shelves of a theological library or an academic bookshop, and you can meet Jesus as a political

revolutionary, a magician who married Mary Magdalene, a Galilean charismatic, a Cynic philosopher, a prophet of the end-times, a hippie in a world of first-century yuppies, and even a hallucinogenic leader of a sacred mushroom cult.

Faced with that identity parade, who do you choose? And how do you choose him? Each scholar claims to be making a serious contribution to the pursuit of truth, and to be using scholarly methods for deciding what is authentic and what is inauthentic in the gospels, and to be interpreting the evidence soberly and scientifically. To explain and discuss the methods used would be another lecture. What I want to do instead is to sample four of the presentations of Jesus currently on offer, and to make some comments on them.

1. Jesus the Talking Head

This is one label which has been attached to the group of mostly American scholars known as the Jesus Seminar. Formed by Robert Funk in 1985, the group includes several leaders in the field of Historical Jesus scholarship today, though half of its members have no-track record in New Testament scholarship at all. In 1993 they published a book entitled *'The Five Gospels: the Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus'*. The five gospels are the four gospels of the New Testament, plus the *Gospel of Thomas* - an apocryphal gospel usually dated about AD150, though many of these scholars regard it as preserving an early and authentic account of many of Jesus' sayings. In the book they conclude that 'eighty-two per cent of the words ascribed to Jesus in the Gospels were not actually spoken by him'. *(The Five Gospels, p.5).*

They reached this conclusion by a system of voting. After circulating papers and discussing the grounds on which they might regard certain sayings of Jesus as authentic or inauthentic, they took a vote, identifying their vote on each saying by a colour: red meant 'almost certainly authentic'. pink meant 'probably authentic', grey meant 'Jesus didn't say this, though the ideas it expresses are close to his own', and black meant 'not authentic'. The grey and black sayings are thus seen not as sayings of Jesus but as later creations of his followers.

The kind of sayings which get the most positive votes tend to be wisdom sayings or shrewd aphorisms such as:

> 'If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other one also' (Matthew 5:39).
>
> 'Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's' (Mark 12:17).
>
> 'Love your enemies' (Luke 6:27).

Hence the label, 'Jesus the talking head': the Jesus of the Seminar is a teacher of wisdom who spoke only in short sayings. He looks more like a wandering Greek philosopher or an oriental guru than a Jewish teacher.

Surprisingly, by the Seminar's criteria, Jesus never quoted Scripture. He never engaged in controversy with others. He never hinted that he might consider himself some kind of Messiah, though others in his day made messianic claims. He never called himself the Son of Man (the commonest title found on his lips in the gospels). He never predicted the future, never foresaw his crucifixion, and never spoke about God's judgement (a horrible concept unworthy of a great sage).

Four particular criticisms have been made by other scholars:

1. The Seminar is not a representative group of scholars, but a self-selecting group. The result is a much more negative impression of the gospels' reliability than you would get from a real cross-section of competent scholars.

2. The Seminar doesn't take seriously enough Jesus' Jewishness or interpret him against his Galilean Jewish milieu.

3. It is difficult to imagine the Jesus whom they describe being crucified. What did he say that would upset anyone too much?

4. They give far too much weight to the *Gospel of Thomas* - which *is* a collection of pithy sayings, and which they date to AD50-60, a hundred years earlier than other scholars. (See discussion in Marsh and Moyise, pp. 63-67; Witherington, pp. 48-50).

A further criticism, that they concentrated exclusively on *sayings* of Jesus, when it is so often *actions* which reveal a person's true nature, has been addressed in *The Acts of Jesus: the Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus* (1998). But the deeds fare even worse than the sayings of Jesus: only 16 per cent of actions recorded in the five gospels are deemed authentic or probably authentic. Curiously, one member of the Seminar is the film-maker Paul Verhoeven, well-known for films such as *'Robocops', 'Basic Instinct'* and *'Showgirls'.* He is trying to make a movie based on the Seminar's work. Some of his script ideas have been criticised by other Seminar members because he plans to include in his film some things about Jesus which the Seminar rejected. He says that if you follow the Seminar's line properly 'you'd have a man walking about from market place to market place saying aphorisms. That isn't much of a movie.' (quoted in Powell, p. 203).

2. The charismatic Jesus

This perspective on Jesus brings together two unlikely bedfellows. The first is Geza Vermes, based in Oxford and famous for his expertise on the Dead Sea Scrolls. He compared Jesus with other Galilean holy men known as *hasidim* - pious, charismatic figures who had a reputation as miracle-workers and operated outside the usual channels of religious power and authority. Two such persons were Honi the Circle-Drawer and Hanina ben Dosa, both of whom are reported in the Talmud to have healed the sick and had power over demons. Honi, in case you are wondering, got called the title Circle-Drawer because he once drew a circle on the ground, stood in it, and insisted to God that he wouldn't leave the circle until God blessed the people with a decent fall of rain.

Vermes pictures 'Jesus curing the sick and overpowering the forces of evil with the immediacy of a Galilean holy man' (*Jesus the Jew*, p. 116). Like these holy men, he stands in the tradition of prophets like Elijah, people 'venerated as a link between heaven and earth independent of any institutional mediation' (*Jesus the Jew*, p. 79). And as a prophet, Jesus proclaims with urgency the breaking in of God's kingdom, God's reign. His powerful exorcisms demonstrate the kingdom's presence: 'If I by the Spirit of God cast out demons, the kingdom of God has come upon you' (Matthew 12:28). The glorious manifestation of God's kingdom could not be long delayed (*The Changing Faces of Jesus,* p. 204).

Vermes seems to have overestimated the similarity between Jesus and Honi and Hanina. For a start, he deals much less critically with the Jewish Talmudic sources than he does with the gospels. Whereas the gospels were written down between thirty and sixty years after the events they record, the Talmudic references to Honi and Hanina are much later. The earliest references to these two Galilean holy men don't present them as charismatic miracle-workers but as righteous men whose prayers were answered by God. And the Jewish historian Josephus, writing in the first century AD, locates Honi in Jerusalem, not Galilee. It looks as though the stories about Honi and Hanina 'grew' as time went on, turning them from righteous men of prayer into miracle-workers - perhaps in competition with stories about Jesus (Powell p. 65; Witherington pp. 109-112).

Secondly, Vermes fails to pick out what is distinctive about Jesus. This is where the other scholar comes in. Graham Twelftree is an Australian who has written two major works in this area, *Jesus the Exorcist* and *Jesus the Miracle-worker*. He points out that Jesus' miracles and exorcisms are not connected with prayer, as are those of Honi and Hanina in the Talmudic stories. Jesus does not pray to God for healing or exorcism but commands it with a remarkable authority. That is something that is found in no one else in the ancient world.

From a detailed and careful assessment of the trustworthiness of each miracle story in the gospels, Twelftree concludes that '*there is hardly any aspect of the life of the historical Jesus which is so well and widely attested as that he conducted unparalleled wonders*' (*Jesus the Miracle Worker,* p. 345, his italics).

And Twelftree shows much more thoroughly than Vermes how central the miracles were to Jesus' own understanding of his mission. In contrast with other exorcists and miracle-workers of the period, Jesus explicitly connected exorcism and miracles with eschatology. Satan was being defeated and the reign of God was breaking in. But Jesus' sayings show not merely that he believed he lived at a time when God was at work in a new way, but that he himself was an eschatological figure bringing

God's reign into the midst of God's people (*Jesus the Exorcist,* pp. 217-224; Witherington p. 114). When questioned by friends of John the Baptist about whether Jesus is really the bringer of God's longed-for salvation, Jesus sends back the message:

> Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news preached to them.
> (Matthew 11:4-5; Luke 7:22).

Like many another enthusiast for his own subject specialism, Twelftree may have overstated the importance of Jesus' miracles at the expense of other aspects of his ministry. But he has undoubtedly given a fine exposition of this significant theme.

3. Jesus the Social Revolutionary

John Dominic Crossan is perhaps the most engaging of all current Historical Jesus scholars. Some of his writing is as vivid as a good novel, and you can't help being intrigued when an advertisement for his book, *Jesus: a Revolutionary Biography,* says:

> Social revolutionary, Jewish Socrates, political troublemaker - this shocking, insightful portrait presents Jesus as a societal rebel who preached and practised a message of radical egalitarianism.

And you can't help but be disarmed when Crossan himself says he didn't try to find a Jesus whom he liked or disliked, and that in fact he found one whom he is himself unable to follow. He imagines a conversation between himself and the historical Jesus:

> 'I've read your book, Dominic, and it's quite good. So, now you're ready to live by my vision and join in my programme?'
>
> 'I don't think I have the courage, Jesus, but I did describe it quite well, didn't I, and the method was especially good, wasn't it?'
>
> 'Thank you, Dominic for not falsifying the message to suit your own incapacity. That at least is something.'
>
> 'Is it enough, Jesus?'
>
> 'No, Dominic, it is not.'
> (*Jesus: a Revolutionary Biography,* p. xiv).

So what, according to Crossan, was Jesus' programme? This is his own summary:

> The historical Jesus was a peasant Jewish Cynic ..... His strategy ..... was the combination of *free healing and common eating*, a religious and economic egalitarianism that negated alike and at once the hierarchical and patronal normalcies of Jewish religion and Roman power. And, lest he himself be interpreted as simply the new broker of a new God, he moved on constantly, settling down neither at Nazareth nor at Capernaum. He was neither broker nor mediator but, somewhat paradoxically, the announcer that neither (broker nor mediator) should exist between humanity and divinity or between humanity and itself. Miracle and parable, healing and eating were calculated to force individuals into unmediated physical and spiritual contact with one another. He announced, in other words, the unmediated or brokerless kingdom of God.' (*Jesus: a Revolutionary Biography,* p. 198; cf *The Historical Jesus*, pp. 421-2).

Like many of his fellow-members of the Jesus Seminar, Crossan regards virtually all sayings which might be called 'eschatological' or 'apocalyptic' as inauthentic. Jesus, he says, used the term 'kingdom of God' not to refer to an apocalyptic event in the near future but to a mode of life in the present (*The Historical Jesus*, p. 304). He tried to subvert all the hierarchies of his day by encouraging everyone, especially the poorer classes, to reject traditional hierarchies, including the family. When told that his family had come to see him, Jesus retorted:

> 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' and looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'
> (Mark 3:33-35).

By asserting that God's kingdom is for children (Mark 10:13-15), Jesus was saying that it is for anybody - or rather, for nobodies. He regarded himself and his companions as such nobodies, and told witty parables comparing the group with impure leaven (Matthew 13:33) or weeds whose influence can't be controlled. (Matthew 13:24-30)

He focuses particularly on Jesus' open table fellowship, which he prefers to call 'open commensality'. In face of all the social conventions which used meals as expressions of social standing, Jesus made a point of eating with anyone, especially those regarded as outcasts. He flouted all the rules by ignoring the boundaries between slave and free, male and female, pure and impure, patron and client, rich and poor (*The Historical Jesus*, pp. 341-4). This radical egalitarianism was an implicit attack on the social system of both the Jewish and the Roman world. It was a strategy for building or rebuilding peasant community along lines which threatened the way in which the whole social structure worked.

Alongside this stress on the significance of meals, Crossan takes seriously some of the healing stories. But for him they are not so much physical restorations to health as the reintegration of people who have been excluded back into society. The healing of someone with leprosy, for example, may or may not have brought bodily healing, but it brought the person back into society and celebrated their belonging in society in community with others.

And in all this, Crossan insists, Jesus did not want to be seen as the *mediator* of something new. He prefers not to speak of Jesus as having disciples at all. He prefers to call them companions, and Jesus' relation to these companions is not one of mediation but of empowerment: 'The kingdom is not his monopoly ..... He does not initiate its existence. He does not control its access' (*The Birth of Christianity*, p. 336).

I can't do justice to Crossan's whole argument in this brief summary. His Jesus is exciting, and yet strangely selective. This Jesus did not teach the Lord's Prayer (*The Historical Jesus*, p. 294), apparently because it includes the phrase 'Your kingdom come', and all sayings implying a future eschatology must be cut out as inauthentic. Nor did he institute the Eucharist (*The Historical Jesus*, pp. 360-7), since he had no plan for the future and no idea that his death had any significance for human salvation. He simply died a martyr's death when he went to Jerusalem, the centre of hierarchical self-interest, and found that the act which had played so well in rural Galilee met only with brutal resistance. The Passion Narrative was mostly concocted by early Christians anxious to show Old Testament prophecies being fulfilled in the story of Jesus. He did not rise from the dead.

One can't help thinking that, despite his claim to honesty, Crossan's methods of study have been influenced by the results he wanted. When it suits him he takes seriously traditions which are attested in more than one source, for example in Mark's Gospel and the so-called Q tradition underlying Matthew and Luke. But the calling of disciples doesn't suit him because it's hierarchical and the story of the Last Supper doesn't suit him because it presents Jesus as a mediator - 'my body given for you' - and implies a saving significance in his death. Yet both events are well attested in more than one early source.

Particularly significant is his systematic exclusion of all future eschatology, all sayings which point to the future establishing of the kingdom as an act of God. To support this decision, he quotes:

> I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John: yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.
> (Luke 7: 28)

Even though Jesus had earlier regarded John as a great prophet, the herald of the One Who Was To Come (Luke 7:24-27) - words which Crossan thinks were uttered on a different, earlier occasion), he changed his mind. He came to reject John's perspective in favour of a non-eschatological view such as I described earlier, so that anyone who shares in this vision, this experience of radical egalitarianism, is greater than John (*The Historical Jesus*, pp. 236-7). But surely Jesus is not rejecting John's perspective. It is a typical wisdom saying, meant to startle by contrast. By stressing that 'the least in the kingdom of God is greater' than John, Jesus means that however great a prophet John may have been, his status pales in comparison to being in God's kingdom.

It is a case of highlighting certain aspects of the gospel tradition about Jesus, and working overtime to dismiss other themes and concerns which seem not to fit with those aspects. And this is one of the constant issues in study of the Historical Jesus. Both scholars and popular writers pick up part of the story and eliminate other parts, not necessarily because the evidence is hopelessly weak, but either because they find them unpalatable, or because they do not believe that two or more strands could be held together in one person. If he was a teacher of wisdom, they say, he could not also be a prophet of God's coming kingdom. If he was committed to offering acceptance and equality to the poor, he could not also claim to be Israel's longed-for Messiah.

Why not? Old Testament prophets could use wisdom-sayings when it suited them. Why could Jesus not be both prophet and wise man? The stories about Elijah present a man who combined political critique, vision of the future, healings and care for the poor. Why not Jesus? An approach which can present a coherent picture of Jesus based on the whole range of evidence has a greater claim to respect than any one-sided portrait.

Another test of a view of Jesus which demands to be taken seriously is: does it explain why Jesus made enemies and was put to death? We can gather not only from the New Testament, but also from Jewish sources and Roman historians that Jesus was accused of leading people astray and that he died on a charge of subverting Jewish sensibilities and Roman power. What kind of Jesus would bring that about?

This leads to my fourth presentation of Jesus, that of Tom Wright, Canon Theologian at Westminster Abbey.

4. Jesus the true Messiah who re-forms Israel

The fundamental task, says Wright, is not to try to reconstruct traditions about Jesus, but to propose hypotheses which account for the traditions we have. Any hypothesis, he says, must provide reasonable answers to five questions:

1. How does Jesus fit into Judaism?
2. What were Jesus' aims?
3. Why did Jesus die?
4. How and why did the early church begin?
5. Why are the gospels what they are?
   (*Jesus and the Victory of God,* pp. 89-121)

Two key observations about first century Judaism are the basis for much of Wright's understanding of Jesus. First, most Jews of the time believed they were still in exile. Though Jews had returned from Babylon in 538 BC, they remained under foreign powers, exiles in their own land. A key text for this perspective would be Daniel 9:24-27, with its message that the exile would not be for 70 years, as Jeremiah prophesied, but for 7 times 70 years. Yet Israel still cherished the hope that their God would return to Zion and the exile would at last end.

Secondly, although eschatological expectation was widespread among Jews, the apocalyptic imagery, of stars falling from the sky and so on, did not refer to the end of the world. Rather it referred to the end of *a* world, a world order in which certain conditions prevail and certain people exercise power and control. Similarly Jesus did not expect the end of the space-time universe. He expected the end of the present world order.

Jesus' message and ministry focus on the fulfilment of God's promise to Israel:

1. Israel's God was about to bring the exile to an end at last.
2. Israel's God was going to act decisively to defeat Israel's enemies.
3. Israel's God was going to return Zion to dwell with the people again.

Jesus promised fulfilment of these hopes, but redefined them in subversive, unexpected ways. In parables he told the story of Israel's renewal. For example, Wright suggests, the parable of the Prodigal Son is not about individual repentance and return to God. It is the story of Israel (the prodigal) being separated from God (the father), and then - after a period in a pagan country - being restored to God and a new life of freedom under his gentle rule. 'And Jesus told the story to make the point that *the return from exile was happening in and through his own work.* The parable ... was about what was happening through Jesus' welcome of outcasts, his eating with sinners ... The older brother in the story represents those who are opposed to the return from exile as it is actually happening: in

this case, the Pharisees and lawyers who see what Jesus is doing and think it scandalous' (*The Challenge of Jesus*, p. 24, his italics).

In proclaiming the kingdom of God, Jesus was announcing that God had already begun to act to bring this great renewal, and calling people to share in this kingdom-movement. His miracles were prophetic signs, showing that Israel's God was bringing their exile to an end and reconstituting Israel for the new era.

Constantly Jesus subverted common assumptions about how God worked among his people, and this brought conflict. Mark Allen Powell summarises:

> Jesus' conflict with Judaism can be understood as a clash of symbols. Jesus replaced key symbols appropriate to preserving Israel's distinctiveness during exile with symbols appropriate for the new reign of God. Feasting replaced fasting; since the exile was ending, life could now be viewed as a celebration (Mark 2:18-19). Open table fellowship replaced segregating purity codes as a more appropriate symbol of life in the post-exile reign of God. Likewise, healing the sick (as opposed to quarantining them) symbolized the restoration of creation that was taking place. But, above all, forgiveness replaced retribution, blessing replaced cursing, love replaced hatred. The restored Israel would seek not to conquer her enemies but to become a light to the nations (*The Jesus Debate*, p. 167).

And what provoked enmity was that Jesus 'was offering the return from exile, the renewed covenant, the eschatological "forgiveness of sins" ... to all the wrong people, and on his own authority' (Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 272).

Wright takes seriously the implicit claims which the Jesus of the gospels constantly made about himself. 'He was declaring, on his own authority, that anyone who trusted in him and in his kingdom-announcement was within the kingdom' (*Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 274). And, conversely, those who did not listen to him would be excluded from the restored Israel. He predicted a national disaster for those who rejected his message of peace, the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. That is what the apocalyptic language of Mark 13 - the darkening of the sun and the falling of stars (Mark 13:24-25) - refers to. And the vision of the coming of 'the son of man' (Mark 13:26) speaks not of the final coming of Jesus at the end of history, but of the vindication of Jesus and his followers, their welcome into the reign of God as the newly restored people of Israel. The temple will be destroyed, and Jesus himself - and perhaps his followers with him - will be the new Temple (*Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 426).

Let's back up a bit now and see how Wright shows Jesus challenging and subverting the key symbols by which Judaism identified itself. He highlights four symbols or markers by which Jews defined themselves - sabbath, food, ancestry and family, and temple - and notes what Jesus does with them (*The Challenge of Jesus*, pp. 35ff; *Jesus and the Victory of God*, pp. 369ff).

The *sabbath* he treats with sovereign freedom, choosing it especially as a day for healing - not because he is feeling mischievous about Jewish tradition, but because the sabbath was the day which signalled freedom from bondage, from captivity. To heal on the sabbath was to say that at last Israel's long-awaited sabbath is breaking in through Jesus' ministry.

Food laws which marked off Jews as different from pagans were sidelined by Jesus (Mark 7:1-23) because, 'in the new day which was dawning, Israel was not meant to be keeping God's light all to herself, but was to share that light with the world' (*The Challenge of Jesus*, p.41).

Tracing their *ancestry* to Abraham meant that Jews attached particular value to *family*. And yet to the man who asked to go and bury his father, Jesus said: 'Leave the dead to bury their own dead; you go and announce God's kingdom' (Luke 9:60). This shocking statement means that the urgency of God's kingdom comes before even the most precious of Israel's institutions.

The *temple* was the centre of Judaism. It was the place where God dwelt, or at least the place where God had dwelt and would do so again. It was the place of sacrifice, the focus of every great festival. It was the power-base of Israel's élite. It was there that Jesus performed the subversive act which led to his arrest. Was it a *cleansing* of the temple, to challenge corruption and restore it to its rightful use? Or was it an acted parable of the temple's forthcoming destruction? Possibly both, but Wright puts weight on the latter view. The central symbol of Israel's life stood under the climactic judgement of god, and if Israel did not repent it would fall to the Romans. It would be followed not by the building of

a new physical temple but 'by the establishment of the messianic community, focused on Jesus himself, that would replace the temple once and for all' (*The Challenge of Jesus*, p. 44).

More positively, Jesus frequently suggested that where he was, and where his followers were, Israel's God was present and active in the same way as he was in the temple. For example, when he declared forgiveness to the paralysed man (Mark 2:5) he was mediating God's forgiveness which was only supposed to be available through the temple and its sacrifices. And - ironically - from the lips of false witnesses at Jesus' trial we hear the true accusation that Jesus said: 'I will destroy this temple made with hands, and in three days I will build another not made with hands' (Mark 14:58).

Such subverting of Jewish symbols inevitably provoked conflict and contributed to Jesus' arrest and death. But the saying about rebuilding the temple links with another significant theme because, Wright suggests, temple building was a royal act from David's time onwards. It raises the issue of messiahship.

During the last hundred years many have questioned whether Jesus saw himself as Messiah. But Wright argues that a whole range of evidence points to this conclusion. Jesus 'saw himself as the leader and focal point of the true, returning-from-exile Israel' and as the king through whom God was bringing about this restoration (*Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 477). That is what his contemporaries would have seen as the work of the Messiah. The entry to Jerusalem was staged with messianic overtones, the acted parable of judgement in the temple was a messianic critique, the last supper was presented as a messianic banquet, and the trial before Caiaphas focused on messianic claims (*Jesus and the Victory of God*, pp. 490-2).

But of course, while implicitly claiming to be the Messiah in whom all the threads of Jewish hope were drawn together, Jesus redefined the meaning of the word. For he would accomplish Israel's rescue and bring God's blessing to the world not by defeating the power of Rome but by offering himself up to death. 'He would defeat evil by letting it do its worst to him' (*The Challenge of Jesus*, p. 61). As Messiah he would embody in himself the destiny of Israel, he would embody Israel's servant vocation, suffering to draw the sting of sin - not only for Israel but also to bring light to the nations (*Jesus and the Victory of God*, pp. 609-10).

As with other scholars, there is so much more which might be said about Wright's presentation. His books are so full of suggestive ideas and illuminating comments on the significance of familiar gospel passages. Certainly there are questions about some of the points in his argument. For instance, his claim that first-century Jews saw themselves as still in exile is doubted by scholars of various persuasions. And others have found inadequate his argument that the language about the coming of the Son of man in Mark 13 refers to Jesus' vindication through the destruction of Jerusalem and not to his future return to earth. Yet he does seem to me to offer a comprehensive and coherent view of Jesus which goes beyond the narrower focus of other writers. And he will engage with questions before which some scholars fall short.

He tackles the issue of *Jesus' relationship to God.* He portrays a Jesus who 'believed he had to do and be, for Israel and the world, that which according to scripture only the God of Israel (actually, YHWH) himself could do and be'. He insists that this is not the same as suggesting that 'Jesus knew he was God' as some Christians might want to put it. Rather, Jesus had an *awareness of vocation* whereby he was called to embody God's saving presence in the world (*The Challenge of Jesus*, pp. 90-1).

He argues that without the resurrection we can't explain why the early church continued to believe Jesus was the Messiah after his execution.

And he speaks eloquently of *the resurrection of Jesus*, as God's vindication of Jesus' messiahship. As a historian, he argues that without the resurrection we can't explain why the early church continued to believe Jesus was the Messiah after his execution. After all, the Romans executed other would-be messiahs, and their followers left no permanent mark (*The Challenge of Jesus*, pp. 102-4).

What kind of Jesus does our faith focus on in the year 2000?

The film *La Dolce Vita* opens with a shot of a helicopter carrying a giant statue of Jesus to Rome. Arms outstretched, Jesus hangs in a sling, and as the helicopter flies over the countryside, people begin to recognize him. 'Hey, it's Jesus!', shouts an old farmer. Nearer Rome, bikini-clad girls sunbathing around a swimming pool wave a friendly greeting, and the helicopter pilot swoops in for a closer look. Silent, and with a rather melancholy look on his face, the concrete Jesus hovers incongruously above the modern world.

Where does he fit in? How does he connect? Like the people who spot him in the film, people are not generally hostile to him. They just don't see how he connects with their lives. And you may feel that this concern is reinforced by my review of what's happening in study of the Jesus of history. To understand Jesus in his real historical context *can* make him seem more remote from us.

But we must remind ourselves, as we said at the beginning, that we have no right to make Jesus something different from what he was in his incarnation in a particular time and place. And we must take courage from a fundamental New Testament perspective which Wright underlines all through his work:

> Israel was chosen to be the people through whom the creator God would address and solve the problems of the whole world. Salvation is of the Jews. The early Christians believed that the one true God had been faithful to that promise, and had brought salvation through the king of the Jews, Jesus himself. Israel was called to be the light of the world; Israel's history and vocation had devolved onto Jesus, solo. He was the true Israel, the true light of the whole world.
> (*The Challenge of Jesus*, pp. 136-7).

Our task, then, is to explore constantly what it means to say that Jesus is the light of the world, *our* world.

And although we must always beware of making Jesus in our own image, we dare not avoid asking: How does Jesus, incarnate, crucified and risen, connect with our world, our culture, our lives?

Let me show you another picture. In the village church of Bré, high above Lake Lugano in Switzerland, is a stained glass window in which the face of Jesus appears unfinished. One side of the face is clear, while the other side has to be filled in by the viewer's imagination. Or is not a front view of the face at all, but a sideways-on view ...? Does it suggest that our understanding of Jesus is inevitably like this? Is it partly something given, rooted in history, and in historical evidence which we have to grapple with; and yet partly formed from our own reflection in the light of our experience of the living Christ?

So what kind of Jesus, what aspects of Jesus, might we want to focus on today?

1. 'The man who fits no formula'
That was a description used by Eduard Schweizer in his 1968 book, *Jesus*. Jesus was constantly puzzling and frustrating his contemporaries because, as we have seen, he would not fit their agendas, their specific expectations, their way of doing things. He was the Messiah, but not the kind of Messiah most of them expected, and so on.

A lot of discussion about Jesus down to the present day has focused on arguing about the labels we stick on him. You can still use questionnaires in the street and ask people, 'Do you believe Jesus was the Son of God?', and a surprising number will say Yes. But that doesn't get to the heart of the issue. Labels are of limited value. I have a friend who is a headteacher. But to say, 'Tony Smith, headteacher' hardly begins to reveal who he is, what he is like, what his enthusiasms and concerns are, what he's like to live with. So with Jesus. We should be less concerned with labels, more concerned with exploring and communicating his character, his concerns, his vision for us and for the world.

2. Focus on Jesus' real humanity
So much Christian thought has been concerned to defend Jesus' divinity that we have lost the sense of discovering an exciting, challenging, credible human being. The first followers of Jesus, after all, didn't begin by seeing him as the Second Person of the Trinity. They met him as a man whom they found totally engaging, and only gradually did they discover that merely human language could not do justice to him.

One thing that can't be said about the Jesus of the gospels is that he was predictable and boring. Try to read the gospels as though you are coming to them for the first time, and what do you find? A Jesus who is brilliant, untamed, full of humour, tender, creative, passionate and compassionate, slippery, paradoxically humble. Engage with the Jesus of the gospels without smoothing off those sharp and puzzling corners, and you find him endlessly fascinating and illuminating. Take the humanity seriously, and you find yourself asking, What would it have been like to hang on the edge of the crowd? Would *I* have invited him over for dinner, like Zacchaeus? Turned away in sadness, like the young synagogue ruler? Betrayed him, like Judas and Peter?

And if it is true, as John's Gospel suggests, that by looking at the earthly Jesus we discover who God is (John 14:6-9), we have no option but to take the human Jesus seriously.

3. Jesus as self-giving love
We take it for granted, but it needs saying at least briefly. So often today's young people feel powerless and undervalued. In a climate of individualism, they find not self-fulfilment but loneliness. In an age when computers are starting to talk to us, they find their neighbours becoming more remote. In a world of virtual reality, they lose the real world of people with whom they can share their deepest feelings. In a world which is too busy, it's so hard to give time to building relationships and to caring for others. And the self-giving love of the earthly Jesus gives a vision of another way of living, and points us to a God who pours out his heart to the world.

And in an age when people are suspicious that every use of power and authority is an exercise in manipulation or abuse, the cross of Jesus says that the heart of God is vulnerable, self-giving love. And it dares us to believe that this love, not the power- games we see around us, will ultimately triumph, and to live our lives by that conviction.

4. Jesus bringer of hope
One point where the message of Jesus impinges very directly on the contemporary mood is the issue of hope or, as the theologians like to put it, eschatology. In both personal and national life there is so often a lack of hope, an anxiety, a lack of direction and purpose.

It seems to me - with Wright and Twelftree but against the Jesus Seminar and Crossan - that the vision of a coming kingdom of God cannot be erased from the authentic message of Jesus. However you interpret the details, there is a vision of a world waiting to be born where there is justice, harmony, peace for people of all nations. And it is based on the conviction that in Jesus the blessings of that world are already breaking in to human experience. Now that vision is not the same as the secular eschatologies which are around us today, for example the eschatologies of Marxism, capitalism, or of David Attenborough expounding on 'The Survival of the Planet' on television tonight in competition with Morse.* But Jesus' eschatology, Jesus' hope, is not unconnected with those hopes, those views of the future. Because it says that amidst all the optimism and pessimism of competing hopes and fears, there is a God who holds the world in his care, has a vision for it, a dream, and invites us to share that dream.

At its heart Christian hope invites us to turn away from 'hoping for' to 'hoping in'. I may hope for many things - a secure job, a win on the lottery, a fast car, a happy marriage, success in a football match. I may focus all my energies on achieving them. All my ambition is bound up in them. If they don't happen, I am devastated.

* Dr Travis's lecture coincided with the much-heralded final episode of 'Morse', in which the famous inspector died.

But to 'hope in' someone brings a deeper perspective. A woman hopes for a cure for her cancer. Even though it doesn't come, she doesn't give in to despair because she has learnt to have confidence in God who will never let her go. Like the ancient Psalm-writer, she knows how brief life is, that 'everyone's life is a mere breath'. But she prays: 'Now, Lord, what do I look for? My hope is in you' (Psalm 39:5-7). Her sense of being held by God's love transforms her future.

And on a global scale, where so often it feels like we are all on a huge airliner hurtling through the air without a pilot, the Christian message is that Jesus shows us a God committed to the world he has created, with a vision for the future of his creation. That isn't merely hope for something better to turn up. It's a hope in a God who, despite the best efforts of humanity to destroy everything of value, will not give up on the people he loves.

5. Jesus, subverter of the status quo
We've seen the scholars' portraits of the Jesus who challenges common assumptions and undermines the power-base of the establishment. Jesus the rebel, Jesus the announcer of God's upside-down kingdom, where the first are last and the last first, and the poor have good news proclaimed to them. I was discussing images of Jesus with some of our students the other day, when

one of them said out of the blue, 'If someone had told me about Jesus the rebel, I would have been attracted to him much sooner than I was.'

Jesus the rebel. But that doesn't mean simply Jesus the anarchist, Jesus the destabiliser. It is not negative and destructive, because Jesus has a vision for the world that God is working towards. *Because* the kingdom of God is about justice and peace and human community in the presence of God, Jesus challenges and subverts everything that is less than just, less than peace-making, everything that distorts real community of persons. *This* Jesus speaks powerfully into our world.

6. Jesus the Lord

This, of course, is not a title used of Jesus much in the gospels. But in the rest of the New Testament, especially in Paul, it is the central designation of the risen and exalted Jesus. One suspects that there is a certain unease about overplaying this theme in a world suspicious about the abuse of power and about manipulation by structures of authority. For some people, 'Jesus the Lord' begins to sound a little bit like 'Jesus the control freak'.

But we have to remember that Christians first used this title of Jesus partly to affirm that *Jesus* is Lord, and *not* Caesar, *not* fate as hidden in your horoscope, *not* money or the State or anything else which seems to offer freedom but turns out to be addictive or enslaving. In calling Jesus 'Lord' they were entrusting themselves to the direction of the one who lays bare the self-giving love of God.

But of course they were saying more than that. In using the same word which the Greek Old Testament uses for God, they were implying that Jesus has the status of God. And in calling Jesus not just 'my Lord' or 'our Lord' but '*the* Lord' they were affirming his claim not just over the world of private spirituality but over the worlds of politics and the arts, work and leisure, family and friendships, science and world development.

But that's a story for another time.

Questions

Malcolm Harrison: *You say that the New Testament writers affirm that Jesus is Lord, not Caesar, and there's also a sense that by saying that Jesus is Lord, you're also saying, or affirming, that the Lord is risen. Would you like to comment?*

Stephen Travis: That's absolutely right. It's the title they used, specifically when thinking about the risen Jesus, and Paul quotes the Psalm which says the Lord (that is, God) said to my Lord (that is, by implication, the Messiah) 'Sit at my right hand till I make your enemies your footstool.' In other words, it's understood as a word of God the Father to Jesus inviting him to sit at God's right hand, in other words to be the risen and exalted Lord. But yes, please make comments and criticisms.

Perhaps when you're talking about Jesus and affirming that he is Lord, not Caesar, that aspect of the resurrection, that he is risen indeed, needs to be developed by theologians rather than concentrating on titles which really don't get you anywhere.

Dorothy Dean: You talk about the temptation to create Jesus in our own image or God in our own image, and I can identify with that temptation very much. Would you not agree that in a sense this is what everybody has done from the year dot onwards, that the writers of the Gospels have in fact interpreted Jesus along with their own thinking? Robert Funk came to Colchester in April and it was a brilliant day. I've since read his 'Honest to Jesus'. I'm at the moment half-way through Marcus Borg 'Meeting Jesus for the First Time'. I've also read Spong's books and found them very fascinating. The impact of Funk was basically to take apart the whole chunk of things which I had up to then thought were 'true' although they could be interpreted in different ways, and made you wonder just how much in fact there was that was absolutely secure to take in and make part of your faith. I find it very difficult being part of the church where there is not very much depth of scholarship and depth of insight and where you are expected to sit through services where everything is put over in a very glib and very easy fashion. For the last twelve months I've been going to the Quakers where I can at least think within my own head and not have something fed into me and say 'I cannot believe this. I cannot go along with that.' I'd like your opinion as to what you make your criterion in sifting the wheat from the chaff. How *do* you decide what is true and what is not?

Stephen travis: There are two basic issues there: one was the making Jesus in our own image issue and the other one was Robert Funk and the Jesus Seminar and the issue of how do you decide what is authentic within the Gospels? I think it's important to make the distinction between what I call making Jesus in my own image, which to put it crudely is making the Jesus that I want and that I feel comfortable with, and the 'Jesus who rings true with me'. We need to find ways of talking about Jesus which ring true, which ring bells with our culture, and which make sense to us, but I think that's a different thing from creating Jesus in our image and a sense of knocking off the bits that challenge us and the bits that we find difficult. The early Christians were doing the positive side of this. For example, Jesus, I believe, constantly spoke about himself as the Son of Man. Now that's a peculiar Hebraic phrase. When the church moves out into the Gentile world where people don't speak Hebrew, they speak Greek, it's just an odd phrase. So you don't find Paul and other New Testament writers using that phrase about Jesus. They use phrases like 'Lord' or 'Son of God' which would ring bells with a Gentile audience, because you have to use phrases which make connections with the society in which you are operating. That's right and proper, and we need to go on thinking about ways of speaking about Jesus which will speak into our culture. So that's an important distinction between 'Jesus in my own image', the Jesus I just want to be comfortable with, and the more positive 'Jesus who rings true', who does actually communicate God to me in ways which make sense in my culture and my situation.

Now, Robert Funk and the Jesus Seminar scholars, many of whom I greatly respect, do take an unusually negative view of the authenticity of the Gospel material as a whole, compared with the wider cross-section of New Testament scholars. To judge what's authentic and what is inauthentic, there's a basic question - where do you start from? Do you start from the assumption that what you find in an ancient document which is presented as a historical narrative is true unless you begin to find reasons which make you suspect that it might not be; or do you start from the assumption that it can't be true unless I positively find reasons why it must be true? Where does the burden of proof lie? Before I studied the New Testament I studied ancient history, and when I studied ancient history, you looked at documents and you gave them the benefit of the doubt. You accepted what they said about Julius Caesar or whoever it was, unless you began to find reasons which might make you suspect that there was some bias or special pleading going on. The burden of proof was on those who wanted to question the reliability of the text. Now many of the scholars of the Jesus Seminar come from the opposite end. They regard the document as guilty unless it can be proved innocent, rather than the other way round. That's partly why they come to a more negative conclusion than I would, because I've started at the other end. When you ask questions like: Does this saying of Jesus fit properly into his Jewish context? Is it the kind of thing that the Jew of his day might have said? Or is this saying, this action of Jesus borne witness to in more than one source? Is it there in Mark's Gospel and perhaps in John's Gospel, which is generally reckoned to be an independent source, not a source which copied from Mark? That would mean you have two separate strands of tradition, both telling you about the same saying or the same event. There is another collection of material in the Gospels which is very difficult to believe that the disciples made up. For example, a saying which attributes ignorance to Jesus. Would a disciple of thirty years later who believed Jesus was just about divine have attributed to Jesus a saying which says 'I don't know such and such'? Very unlikely. So there are tests like that that you can apply to the material which is in the Gospels. People like Tom Wright and Graham Twelftree would certainly by using those criteria give a lot of credibility to most of the Gospels rather than to only a small percentage. That's only touching the surface, but that's how you would begin to do the exercise.

Malcolm Harrison: *Robert Funk is part of the American reductionist philosophy, reducing everything to its basic element. There is no such thing as a community, only an individual, sort of mentality. philosophy. As you rightly say, he shifts the burden of proof from the criteria of authenticity which was, of course, part of the Judaeo-historical criticism, to one of inauthenticity. He never really lays his cards out or tells us what his presuppositions are. When you're doing your hermeneutics, you play your cards, you put them out and say: 'This is my situation. This is where I start from,'*

Jim Bateman: *I'd like to ask if you could unpack a little more or give a critique on Tom Wright's view of New Testament eschatology: were the 'end of the world' sayings really about the end of the world order? I wonder if you'd say a bit more about that, and particularly if you agree with that interpretation.*

Stephen Travis: Well this, of course, is controversial. Tom Wright looks at the passages in the Gospels (Mark 13 and Matthew 24) where Jesus speaks about the destruction of the temple and about the coming of the Son of Man, and associated with the coming of the Son of Man there's language about the sun and the moon turning to blood and the stars falling from the sky, and that kind

of thing. Traditionally that language has been seen as Jesus looking forward to the final coming of the Son of Man, in other words the second coming of Jesus. Tom Wright argues that if you look in the Old Testament, for example in passages about the fall of Babylon in Isaiah, you get that same kind of language about the stars falling from the sky with reference to the destruction of Babylon. In other words, it's not talking about the end of the world. It's talking about the end of the world order dominated by Babylon. We use the word 'earth-shattering', meaning not something literal but something that shatters the way the world operates, and he says that language about the coming of the Son of Man is not about his final coming. It is about the destruction of Jerusalem, which took place in AD70, which would itself be the vindication of Jesus and his message and of Jesus and his followers, to show that they, as it were, were on the side of God rather than those Jewish people who had resisted him. Now Tom Wright emphatically says that by interpreting that particular text in that way he is not saying 'I don't believe in the second coming of Jesus'. He's saying 'I do not find it in that particular passage'. And if you look in more recent books, like the one that's come out this year called *'The Challenge of Jesus'* which is a more popular presentation of his view than the big, more complicated books, he makes that very clear. He does affirm the final coming of Jesus, Jesus' victory at the end of history, which you find in other parts of the New Testament; but he doesn't find it in that particular passage in Mark 13.

Robert Wiggs: *My question is, what do you think about the frightening aspect of Jesus, like when he made the Gadarene swine run over the cliffs, and the people of the village actually asked him to leave the area, that kind of aspect that isn't often mentioned in sermons and descriptions of Christ.*

There are difficult and puzzling things like that, and I have to confess I've got no nice or slick answer to that. It's not for me to tell you what to do, but when I find things puzzling about Jesus, I don't want simply to say: 'Well, I can't understand that, I can't cope with it, therefore I reject it.' But this is one that I haven't yet really come to terms with. What's often said about that is that these people shouldn't have been keeping pigs anyway, from a Jewish point of view, so it would create something of a laugh when that story was told to a Jewish audience, maybe. But another thing that is sometimes said about it is that it is Jesus affirming, as he does in other ways, that this person who has been so torn apart from whatever it is that has been destroying his life, is of more value than a bunch of pigs; just as on another occasion he says to the Pharisees, 'Well, you'll take a sheep out of a hole on the Sabbath, and yet you complain when I heal somebody on the Sabbath. Isn't this person of more value than your sheep?' So that sort of thing is brought into the equation. Other people will say: 'Well, Jesus healed and restored this man and maybe at the same time there was some rush of pigs into the lake for reasons we know not what, and somehow people connected these things together, and were frightened about it.' But it remains a mystery. So you can ask these kinds of questions about it. I've studied it, I've read various books on it, and tried to come to terms with it, but remain somewhat puzzled, as you do.

Question: *Why do we not have more open questioning in our churches, for example the ideas of Bishop Spong?*

Stephen Travis: I know a little about John Spong, who from my point of view is an attractive character, some of whose views I disagree with. I think the preaching in parish churches and in theological colleges is possibly responsible for a lack of balance. I think that's a very important issue. I agree with you that we should be more open in our churches, not always perhaps in the pulpit on a Sunday, but certainly in study groups where people have got a chance to engage in discussion with issues and work things out together. I think we are much too protective about issues of faith. We discourage people very often from actually thinking things through and owning faith for themselves. Even though I don't agree with a lot of Robert Funk's conclusions, I agree very much with what you said about the importance of opening up the questions and giving people permission to talk about them. And my experience is that when it's done sensitively rather than aggressively within churches, people respond and they say, 'Yes, we're glad you've done it, and please can we have some more; and why haven't we been hearing some of this most of the time?' It's an interesting question, who is to blame for this kind of conspiracy of silence? I suppose theological colleges and such places do take some of the blame, but I assure you that in the kind of teaching that goes on in a college like mine, we are always pushing students to think through questions and to read people who they think they are going to disagree with and to help them mature faith through that process.

Andrew Knowles: *When I was an undergraduate we were supervised by a rather dry and dusty New Testament scholar by the name of Geoffrey Styler. After a couple of hours in his rather dark and airless room, and without too much mental stimulus, my supervision partner suggested that we might*

go in search of a young research scholar by the name of Stephen Travis who might supervise us instead. And that, I think, is how we met. We appreciated straightaway Stephen's lightness of touch, his range of sympathy and lack of dogmatism; but he could open up the arguments for us and help our exploration. So Stephen I don't think you've changed too much from those days. Thank you very much for all that you've given us this evening, and we wish you well in training the next generation of preachers.

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