Response to Criticism of
_The Real Jesus_

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I wrote _The Real Jesus_ as someone who has participated in critical New Testament scholarship for some thirty years and who is committed to the Christian faith, if not as a description of my character at least as the symbolic world in which I find it impossible not to dwell.

The book tries to do three basic things: first, to demystify claims made by or for some strands of current historical Jesus publications; second, to disentangle some of the cultural contexts enabling such claims to flourish; third, to raise questions concerning the study of Christianity and the ways of knowing—specifically, the limits of historical knowing, and the legitimacy of other ways of knowing, especially religious and literary. I will elaborate each briefly by way of introduction.

1. Demystification. The proliferation of books challenging traditional beliefs from those claiming to be scholars has had two effects. On those who still think scholars are in the truth business, announcements in the media that Jesus did not say or do what the Gospels attribute to him the effect is confusion: has the Jesus of the church been discredited? On those—far too many—who already think the life of the mind and the life of faith incompatible, the effect is confirmation: careless declarations by scholars confirm what had been suspected all along, namely that scholarship erodes faith. The already disastrous chasm between critical intelligence and faith has been extended.

In this situation, I thought (and still think) it important to show the limits of such claims, not in the name of faith but in the name of science. I tried to show that the claimants by no means represented all scholars, and that on the grounds of the most disinterested science, their historiographical practice had serious deficiencies. My only regret in this regard is that I may have given the impression that I opposed only one form of historical Jesus research (that carried out in the style of the Jesus Seminar, Borg and Crossan), and that I might find the sort purveyed by Wright and Sanders (for example) more congenial. In fact, however, I have as much problem with the attempt to read the historical Jesus directly off the pages of the Gospels (as though there were no critical problems) as I do with the attempt to discover the historical Jesus by abandoning the Gospel narratives.

2. Disentangling the Cultural Context. The media “end run” of the Jesus Seminar and other publications reveals the erosion of boundaries in the cultural institutions of the church and academy as places where meaningful ...

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