

BOOKS BY JOHN PIPER

God's Passion for His Glory

The Pleasures of God

Desiring God

The Dangerous Duty of Delight

Future Grace

A Hunger for God

Let the Nations Be Glad!

A Godward Life

Pierced by the Word

Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ

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Sex and the Supremacy of Christ

Taste and See

Fifty Reasons Why Jesus Came to Die

God Is the Gospel

Contending for Our All

What
JESUS
DEMANDS
from the
WORLD

JOHN PIPER

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*All authority in heaven and on earth
has been given to me.*

J E S U S

SUGGESTIONS FOR HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

Long books seem daunting because we think we should start at the front and read to the back and not skip anything. I don't expect most people to read this book that way. I hope some will. I did structure the book so that matters at the front may help the reader understand matters further on. And there is a kind of foundation, progression, and climax. But the chapters have enough independence that most of them can be read without the others. It will be obvious when one chapter depends on another.

Therefore, I invite you to step in anywhere. You don't have to read the Introduction first. I hope that the way Jesus' commands are interwoven will draw you further in, from one issue to another.

I have tried to keep the chapters relatively short so that in general they can be read at one sitting for those who only have limited time from day to day. This is why some of the chapters deal with the same command from different angles. I thought it better to handle the matter in several chapters rather than in one long one.

Since the focus is on the commands of Jesus in this book, much about his life and death is not here. If you want to see how I have tried to portray these more fully, you can look at two other (shorter!) books where I deal with Jesus and his death: *Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ* (Crossway Books, 2004) and *Fifty Reasons Why Jesus Came to Die* (Crossway Books, 2006). And, of course, there are important books by others that I will be referring to along the way.

Most of all I hope you will pray as you read. Even if you are

not accustomed to praying, ask God to protect you from any mistakes I may have made and to confirm to you what is true. In the end, what matters is the effect that God produces in our lives through his written word by his Spirit. That's what makes prayer so crucial. In prayer we ask God to transform us in that way.

Finally, may the living Jesus fulfill the purpose of his word as you read: "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" (John 15:11).

INTRODUCTION: THE AIM OF THE BOOK

The aim of this book is God-glorifying obedience to Jesus. To that end I am seeking to obey Jesus' last command: "Make disciples of all nations . . . *teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you*" (Matt. 28:19-20). Jesus' final command was to teach all his commandments.

THE IMPOSSIBLE FINAL COMMAND

Actually, the final command was more precise than that. He did *not* say, "Teach them all my commandments." He said, "Teach them to *observe* all my commandments." You can teach a parrot all of Jesus' commandments. But you cannot teach a parrot to *observe* them. Parrots will not repent, and worship Jesus, and lay up treasures in heaven, and love their enemies, and go out like sheep in the midst of wolves to herald the kingdom of God.

Teaching people to parrot all that Jesus commanded is easy. Teaching them to *observe* all that Jesus commanded is *impossible*. Jesus used that word. When a rich man could not bring himself to let go of his riches and follow him, Jesus said, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. . . . With man it is *impossible*, but not with God. For all things are possible with God" (Mark 10:25-27).

Therefore, the person who sets himself to obey Jesus' final commission—for example, to teach a rich man to *observe* the command to "renounce all that he has" (Luke 14:33)—attempts the impos-

sible. But Jesus said it was *not* impossible. “All things are possible with God.” So the greatest challenge in writing this book has been to discern God’s way of making impossible obedience possible.

Jesus said that this impossible goal happens through *teaching*. “Make disciples . . . *teaching* them to observe all that I have commanded you.” There is, of course, more to it than that—like the atoning death of Jesus (Mark 10:45) and the work of the Holy Spirit (John 14:26) and prayer (Matt. 6:13). But in the end Jesus focused on teaching. I take this to mean that God has chosen to do the impossible through the teaching of all that Jesus commanded. That’s what I pray this book will prove to be—a kind of teaching that God will use to bring about impossible obedience to Jesus. And all of that for the glory of God.

TEACHING AND OBEDIENCE THAT GLORIFY GOD

The reason I emphasize the glory of God is because Jesus did. He said, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and *give glory to your Father who is in heaven*” (Matt. 5:16). The ultimate goal of Jesus’ commandments is not that we observe them by doing good works. The *ultimate* goal is that God be glorified. The obedience of good works is penultimate. But what is ultimate is that in our obedient lives God be displayed as the most beautiful reality in the world. That is Jesus’ ultimate goal¹ and mine.

This helps me answer the question: What kind of teaching of Jesus’ commandments might God be willing to use to bring about such impossible obedience? If the aim of obedience is ultimately the glory of God, then it is probable that the teaching God will use is the kind that keeps his glory at the center. Therefore, my aim has been to keep the supremely valuable beauty of God in proper focus throughout the book.

¹ See especially *Demand #47*.

KEEPING THE COMMANDMENTS CONNECTED TO JESUS AND HIS WORK

How then do we keep the beauty of God in proper focus in relation to Jesus' commandments? By treating the meaning and motivation of the commands in connection with the person and work of Jesus. The person and work of Jesus are the primary means by which God has glorified himself in the world. No revelation of God's glory is greater. Jesus said, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). Therefore, his *person* is the manifestation of the glory of God. To see him as he really is means seeing the infinitely valuable beauty of God. Jesus also said, as he was praying, "I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do" (John 17:4). Therefore, his *work* is a manifestation of the glory of God. When we see what he achieved and how he did it, we see the majesty and greatness of God.

Therefore, my aim has been to *probe the meaning and the motivation of Jesus' commands in connection with his person and work*. What emerges again and again is that what he is commanding is a life that displays the worth of his person and the effect of his work. His intention is that we not disconnect what he commands from who he is and what he has done.

We should not be surprised, then, that Jesus' final, climactic command is that we teach all nations to observe all that he commanded. This leads to his ultimate purpose. When obedience to his commands happens, what the world sees is the fruit of Jesus' glorious work and the worth of his glorious person. In other words, they see the glory of God. This is why Jesus came and why his mission remains until he comes.

A SKETCH OF THE PERSON AND WORK OF JESUS

Anticipating what we will see later in the book, the briefest sketch of Jesus' person and work should be given here, so that from the start the commands rest on their proper foundation. Jesus came into the world, sent by God, as the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. When Jesus

asked his disciples who they thought he was, Peter answered, “You are the Christ [that is, Messiah], the Son of the living God.” To this Jesus responded, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 16:16-17).

When Jesus was on trial for his life, the charge was blasphemy, and eventually treason against Caesar, because of his apparent claims to be the Messiah, the King of Israel, the Son of God. The Jewish high priest asked him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” And Jesus said, “I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:61-62).

WHY JESUS FAVORED THE TITLE *SON OF MAN*

Even though Jesus acknowledged that he was the Messiah, the Son of God, his favorite designation for himself was “Son of Man.” At one level this title carries the obvious meaning that Jesus was truly human. But because of its use by the prophet Daniel, it probably is a very exalted claim of universal authority.

Behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. (Dan. 7:13-14)

The reason Jesus favored the title *Son of Man* for himself was that the terms *Messiah* and *Son of God* were loaded with popular political pretensions. They would give the wrong impression about the nature of his messiahship. They could easily imply that he fit in with the conceptions of the day that the Messiah would conquer Rome and liberate Israel and set up his earthly kingdom. But Jesus had to navigate these political waters by presenting himself as truly the Messiah, even the divine Son of God with universal authority, but

also reject the popular notion that the Messiah would not suffer but immediately rule.

The term *Son of Man* proved most useful in this regard because though it did carry exalted claims for those who had ears to hear, on the face of it he was not making explicit claims to political power. Under this favorite title (while not rejecting the others), Jesus was able to make his claims that the long-awaited messianic kingdom of God had come in his ministry.²

THE KINGDOM OF GOD HAD COME INTO HISTORY

The Jewish people longed for the day when the Messiah would come and bring the kingdom of God. The kingdom would mean that the enemies of Israel are defeated, sins are wiped away, diseases are healed, the dead are raised, and righteousness, joy, and peace hold sway on the earth with the Messiah on the throne. Jesus arrived and said, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). What he meant was that in his own ministry the liberating, saving reign of God had arrived. “If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then *the kingdom of God has come upon you . . . the kingdom of God is in the midst of you*” (Luke 11:20; 17:21).

But there was a mystery. Jesus called it “the secret of the kingdom of God” (Mark 4:11). The mystery was that the kingdom of God had come in history *before* its final, triumphant manifestation. Fulfillment was here, but consummation was not here.³ The kingdom would arrive in two stages. In the first stage the Messiah would come and suffer, and in the second stage the Messiah would come in glory (Luke 24:46; Mark 14:62).

²For a helpful overview of the titles of Jesus in the Gospels in the space of twelve pages see Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997), 401-412.

³For an excellent book-length treatment of the kingdom of God in the ministry of Jesus see George Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1974).

HE CAME TO SERVE AND DIE FOR SINS AND RISE AGAIN

Therefore, the primary work of Jesus on the earth during his first coming was to suffer and die for the forgiveness of sins. He said, “Even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). And at the Last Supper with his disciples, he took the cup and said, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:28).

Dying was not his only mission. But it was central. In shedding his blood he purchased the new-covenant promises. The new covenant was God’s promise that all who enter the coming kingdom will have their sins forgiven, will have the law written on their hearts, and will know God personally (Jer. 31:31-34). The blessings of this covenant are crucial in enabling us to obey Jesus’ commandments. Which makes Jesus’ death of supreme importance in bringing about the impossible obedience that he demands.

But there was more to his mission. When John the Baptist was perplexed about whether Jesus was really the Messiah, he sent word to him from prison: “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” Jesus answered, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me” (Matt. 11:3-6). In other words, “All my healing and preaching are a demonstration of my messiahship, but don’t take offense that I am not fulfilling the political expectation of earthly rule. I *am* the one who is to come, but my central mission (in this first coming) is suffering—to give my life as a ransom for many.”

When his mission was accomplished, after three days in the grave, Jesus rose from the dead. This was God’s plan. It was an act of supreme authority over death. “No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father” (John 10:18). When he was raised, he appeared to his disciples on many occasions and gave them proof that he was

physically alive (Luke 24:39-43). He opened the Scriptures to them so they could see more fully how he fulfilled God's promises (Luke 24:32, 45). Then he commissioned them to be his witnesses, instructed them to wait for the promised Holy Spirit, and ascended into heaven (Luke 24:46-51).

OBEDIENCE IS THE FRUIT OF HIS WORK AND THE DISPLAY OF HIS GLORY

On the basis of who he was and what he accomplished, Jesus made his demands. The demands cannot be separated from his person and work. The obedience he demands is the fruit of his *redeeming work* and the display of his *personal glory*. That is why he came—to create a people who glorify his gracious reign by bearing the fruit of his kingdom (Matt. 21:43).

When he said, “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10), he was speaking about Zacchaeus who had just been so transformed that he gave half his possessions to the poor (Luke 19:8). In other words, the Son of Man came to save people from their suicidal love affair with possessions (and every other idol) and to lead them into a kind of impossible obedience that displays the infinite worth of Jesus. Therefore, my effort in this book has been to hold together the meaning and motivation of Jesus' commands, the greatness of his work, and the glory of his person.

A WORD ABOUT METHOD

I will give more detail about methodology in the following “A Word to Biblical Scholars” (which I invite everyone to read!), but it seems good to include at this point some crucial guiding choices that I have made. My method is to reflect on the meaning and motivation of Jesus' demands *as they appear in the New Testament Gospels* in the context of his person and work. I do not cite the rest of the New Testament for my understanding of Jesus in the Gospels. Citing the whole New Testament is a perfectly legitimate thing to do, and in my preaching I do not hesitate to bring Scriptures from anywhere

to help make any text plain, provided I don't change the meaning of either text. But in this book I have given my rendering of Jesus almost entirely through the lens of his own words as recorded in the Gospels. One of my subordinate aims in this approach is to encourage confidence in the unity of the New Testament, because the upshot of this portrayal is so compatible with what the other New Testament writers taught.

WHY THIS TITLE FOR THE BOOK?

A few words about the title *What Jesus Demands from the World*. I am aware that the word *demands* is jarring to many modern ears. It feels harsh, severe, strict, stark, austere, abrasive. The reason I choose that word is to confront some of the underlying causes for why it would feel offensive to portray Jesus as demanding. My conviction is that if we rightly understand Jesus' demands, and if we are willing to find in him our supreme joy, his demands will not feel severe but sweet. They would land on us the way the Lady's commands landed on the beasts in C. S. Lewis's novel *Perelandra*: "The beasts would not think it hard if I told them to walk on their heads. It would become their delight to walk on their heads. I am His beast, and all His biddings are joys."⁴

But it would be a cheap and superficial spin to give the impression that Jesus does not in fact often speak abrasively and sound severe. This is true not only toward his *adversaries*, the scribes and Pharisees—for example, in Matthew 23, where he calls them children of hell (v. 15), "blind fools" (v. 17), "blind guides" (vv. 16, 24), "hypocrites" (v. 27), "whitewashed tombs" (v. 27), and "brood of vipers" (v. 33). It is also true toward his *disciples*. For example, he says, "If you . . . who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children . . ." (Matt. 7:11); and to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man" (Mark 8:33); and again to

⁴C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra* (London: Macmillan, 1973), 76.

Peter, referring to John's destiny, "What is that to you? You follow me!" (John 21:22).

And after a blunt and jarring teaching in John 6 ("Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life," v. 54), John comments that when "many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?' . . . After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him'" (vv. 60, 66). Such was the price of how he spoke. My aim is not to gloss over the tough implications of the word "demands" or to soften the "hard" sayings of Jesus; the aim is to be changed in our hearts and in our understanding to such a degree that the tough Jesus is as sweet to us as the tender Jesus.

AUTHORITY AND INTIMACY UNDER THE FINAL COMMISSION

That is my goal. You can feel the two come together in what Jesus says on either side of his final command to make disciples. On one side he says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matt. 28:18). And on the other side he says, "Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). The one says, "I make demands because I have the right. All authority in the universe is mine." The other says, "I make demands because I will help you. I will be with you forever."

I have tried to structure the chapters of the book to draw the reader from shorter chapters and gentler demands toward the more difficult (but no less precious) demands of Jesus.⁵ This is not merely stylistic or tactical. It is theologically fitting. Most of the first nineteen chapters do not demand any external action. They are essentially about what happens in the mind and heart. These come first because the kind of obedience Jesus demands moves from the inside (where the value of Jesus is savored) to the outside (where the value of Jesus is shown).

Of these chapters, the first seven are "You Must Be Born Again,"

⁵For how I chose which commands to include in the book see p. 34-35.

“Repent,” “Come to Me,” “Believe in Me,” “Love Me,” “Listen to Me,” and “Abide in Me.” When these demands are seen for what they really are, they turn the absolute authority of Jesus into a treasure chest of holy joy. When the most glorious person in the universe pays all my debts (Matt. 20:28), and then demands that I come to live with him and enter into his joy (Matt. 25:21), there can be no more desirable demand imaginable. To such a one I say, with Augustine, “Command what you wish, but give what you command.”⁶

DARE HE MAKE DEMANDS OF THE WHOLE WORLD?

The other word in the title that sounds provocative is “world”—*What Jesus Demands from the World*. Two objections arise. One is: *Did* he make demands on the whole world? The other is: *Dare* he make demands on the whole world?

One may ask, did Jesus give all these demands to the world, or did he give them only to his disciples? Is this an ethic for the world or just for the followers of Jesus? The answer is: The demands he gave only to his disciples are also meant for the world because he demands all people everywhere to become his disciples. That is the point of his final command: “Go therefore and make disciples of *all nations*, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20). Jesus dares to lay claim to “all nations”—all ethnic groups on the planet.⁷ No exceptions. Jesus is not a tribal deity. All authority in the universe is his, and all creation owes its allegiance to him.

ADVANCING WITH ALL AUTHORITY BUT NO SWORD

He does not send his people to make disciples with a sword. His kingdom does not come by force, but by truth and love and sacrifice and the power of God. “My kingdom is not of this world. If

⁶ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin, 1961), 40 (X, xxix).

⁷ In the final two chapters of this book, I draw out the implications of this verse for the world and explain the meaning of “all nations” more fully.

my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting” (John 18:36). Jesus’ followers do not kill to extend his kingdom. They die. “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). “Some of you they will put to death” (Luke 21:16). Not only will they put the followers of Jesus to death, but they will do it in the name of their religion. “The hour is coming,” Jesus says, “when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God” (John 16:2).

Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth, but for now he restrains his power. He does not always use it to prevent his people’s pain, even though he could, and sometimes does. He is with us to the end of the age, but not always to rescue us from harm. He calls us to walk the same road he walked. “If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20). “If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household” (Matt. 10:25).

The universal authority of Jesus produces a mission of *teaching*, not a mission of terror. His aim is God-glorifying obedience to all that he commanded. The kind of obedience that glorifies God is free and joyful, not constrained and cowering. Even when the cost is supreme, the joy is triumphant, because the cause of Jesus cannot fail. “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven” (Matt. 5:11-12). It is a costly mission, but a joyful one.

My prayer for this book is that it will serve that global mission—to “make disciples of all nations . . . *teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*” I pray I am a faithful echo of Jesus when he said, “He who sent me is true, and I declare *to the world* what I have heard from him” (John 8:26).

A WORD TO BIBLICAL SCHOLARS (AND THOSE WHO WONDER WHAT THEY ARE DOING)

It requires little imagination to hear a New Testament scholar say, “Good heavens, Piper totally ignores two hundred years of critical quests for the historical Jesus!” I would understand the response. It isn’t quite right, however. “Ignores” is not the right word. It would be more accurate to say that I estimate most of the fruit of those quests to be unreliable and unusable to accomplish what Jesus aims to accomplish in the world.

WHAT FRUIT FROM THE QUESTS FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS?

In this regard little has changed since 1931 when Edwyn Hoskyns and Noel Davey wrote, “There are no ‘assured results’ of New Testament Criticism.”¹ What this means in regard to the Quest for the Historical Jesus is not that nothing sure can be said about Jesus, but that the effort to go behind the four New Testament Gospels

¹Sir Edwyn Hoskyns and Noel Davey, *The Riddle of the New Testament* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1931), 259.

launches one onto a sea of speculation that has arrived at no island that could be called a reliable portrait of Jesus.²

Scholars speak of three Quests for the Historical Jesus. The First Quest was rooted as far back as Benedict Spinoza (1632–1677), and then worked out through Hermann Reimarus (1694–1768), David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874), William Wrede (1859–1906), and others. It came to an end under the double attack of Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965), who argued that it wasn't radical enough, and Martin Kähler (1835–1912), who argued that the historical Jesus, as reconstructed by the critics, was not the "historic biblical Christ" and was therefore useless for the faith of the church.³

The Second Quest for the Historical Jesus was awakened in 1953 by a student of Rudolf Bultmann, Ernst Käsemann. These were the German giants whom I felt I had to come to terms with in my graduate school days in Munich in the early 1970s. Interestingly, both Bultmann and Käsemann lived to be ninety-two years old. But Bultmann was no longer active in the early 1970s. He died in 1976. Käsemann was in his sixties when I was studying in Germany, but I only met him briefly at a seminar in Paris. Along with Günther Bornkamm these three were the guardians of critical history that I had to reckon with no matter what saying of Jesus I quoted in my doctoral dissertation on Jesus' love command.

² Ben Witherington III renders the following assessment of the first two Quests: "The upshot of the first two quests, as much as anything else, was to reveal the frustrating limitations of the historical study of any ancient person. . . . Nothing is as fleeting as many of the latest trends in New Testament scholarship, including studies of the historical Jesus. This is easily seen simply by reviewing the trends and impact of the Second Quest for the historical Jesus, which offered us, among other things, an existentialist Jesus. The historical Jesus and the Jesus that can be reconstructed by the historical-critical method are not one and the same. More to the point, the Jesus that is reconstructed by an idiosyncratic use of the historical-critical method or is based on reducing the field of focus to a few passages may have only minimal connections with the real Jesus." *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 247.

³ All the relevant documents by these and other authors are gathered helpfully into one volume: *The Historical Jesus Quest: Landmarks in the Search for the Jesus of History*, ed. Gregory W. Dawes (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999). Another helpful collection of historic essays on the quests for the historical Jesus is *The Historical Jesus in Recent Research*, ed. James D. G. Dunn and Scot McKnight, *Sources for Biblical Theological Study*, Vol. 10 (Winona Lake, Ind: Eisenbrauns, 2005).

THE ROOTS OF DISILLUSIONMENT

The upshot of those days in Germany was a growing disillusionment with the historical effort to reconstruct a Jesus of history behind the unified portrayal of Jesus in the New Testament Gospels. I detected a good bit of what seemed to be scholarly disingenuousness. Scholarly articles would begin with a healthy dose of “perhaps,” “probably,” “possibly,” and other nuanced qualifiers, but by the end of the article there had emerged (out of nowhere it seemed to me) a confidence that something reliable and useful had been found. For my part I saw massive minds assembling, with great scholarly touch, a house of cards.

It helps to be sixty years old. I have watched the cards collapse over and over. For example, who of us today can give any serious account of the reconstructions of the historical Jesus by Milan Machoveč (*Jesus für Atheisten*, 1972), Herbert Braun (*Jesus*, 1969), or Kurt Niederwimmer (*Jesus*, 1968)? But these were the cutting-edge reconstructions that, by the standards of the guild, I had to come to terms with. The first two argued with Bultmann that the kingdom of God in Jesus’ ministry was a mythological construct that could be dispensed with today as we find the political (Machoveč was a Marxist) and existential “meaning” of Jesus for us. Niederwimmer exploited, as the book jacket said, “the assured results of depth psychology” to find in the kingdom of God “the objectification of a collective process of consciousness.” I was not impressed with the fruit of the Second Quest. I had seen glorious things in the Jesus of the Gospels, and the Quest was offering me husks and ashes.

I found myself at home in these amazing words of Adolf Schlatter as he defined what he believed scholarship (*die Wissenschaft*) should be.

I keep myself as free as possible from conjectures and avoid therefore the effort to overturn them. This does not seem like a fruitful business to me. For conjectures are not overturned by producing more of the same. They sink away when one sees that observa-

tion is more fruitful than conjecture. . . . I call *Wissenschaft* [scholarship] the observation of what exists (*des Vorhandenen*), not the attempt to imagine what is not visible. Perhaps one will object that the guesswork of conjecture excites and entertains while observation is a hard and difficult work. That's true; play is easier than work. But the Gospel is misunderstood when one makes a plaything out of it.⁴

The conviction was growing in me that life is too short and the church is too precious for a minister of the Word to spend his life trying to recreate a conjectured Jesus. There was work to be done—very hard work—to see what is really there in the God-given portrayal of Jesus in the New Testament Gospels.

WHAT HOPE FOR THE THIRD QUEST?

The Third Quest for the Historical Jesus “began in the early 1980s, fueled by some new archaeological and manuscript data, some new methodological refinements, and some new enthusiasm that historical research did not need to lead to a dead end.”⁵ It is still in process, and there are surveys available of what is happening.⁶ Ben Witherington observes, “The desire to say something new and fresh characterizes almost all of the [Third Quest] works examined in this study, sometimes to the extreme of preferring the new over the probable.”⁷ My own assessment of what is happening is this: To the degree that the present reconstructions of the historical Jesus depart from the portrayal found in the Gospels of the New Testament, they will be forgotten the same way Machoveč, Braun, and Niederwimmer are forgotten.

There are reasons why this is so.

⁴ Adolf Schlatter, *Der Evangelist Matthäus*, 6th ed. (Stuttgart: Calver Verlag, 1963), xi. My translation.

⁵ Witherington, *The Jesus Quest*, 12-13.

⁶ Besides Witherington's overview cited in the previous footnote, see Larry Hurtado, “A Taxonomy of Recent Historical-Jesus Work,” in *Whose Historical Jesus?* ed. William E. Arnal and Michel Desjardins (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1997), 272-295; Jonathan Knight, *Jesus: An Historical and Theological Investigation* (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 15-56; *The Historical Jesus in Recent Research*, ed. Dunn and McKnight.

⁷ Witherington, *The Jesus Quest*, 247.

First, no reliable or lasting portrait of Jesus has ever been reconstructed from going behind what the four Gospels portray. There is no reason to think this will change. The reason is at hand: When you abandon *das Vorhandenen* (what exists at hand) for conjectures, you turn scholarship into an academic game. What is needed to give the game life is toys. And everybody knows the market and the academy demand new toys every generation. They cannot last. The tragedy is how much damage they do to people who do not have roots in the Gospels—and do not have the benefit of being sixty years old.

THE GOSPELS HAVE NOT BEEN OVERTHROWN

Second, the portrayal of Jesus in the four Gospels has not been overthrown by scholarship. The appearance of overthrow arises from the unwarranted creation of criteria of authenticity that by definition will rule out aspects of the New Testament portrayal. Thankfully, God has raised up several generations of careful, rigorous, and faithful scholars who are not cowed by the radical critics and who patiently go about their work establishing the historical credibility of the four Gospels. I thank God for them. I don't mean that they provide proof of the Gospels. I mean they show that the attacks on the historical validity of the portrayal of Jesus in the Gospels are not compelling.⁸

FRAGMENTS LEAD TO ARBITRARY RECONSTRUCTIONS

Third, the attempt to reconstruct a reliable, compelling portrait of Jesus behind the Gospels is an illusion because by definition the

⁸In this connection, the following books offer counterarguments to the Third Quest and the Quest in general: Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1987); Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997); Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998); D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991), 40-68; *Jesus Under Fire*, ed. Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1995); Paul Barnett, *The Truth About Jesus: The Challenge of the Evidence* (Sydney: Aquila Press, 1994); Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996); Gregory Boyd, *Cynic, Sage or Son of God? Recovering the Real Jesus in an Age of Revisionist Replies* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1995); Gary Habermas, *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press, 1996); Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1998).

method adopted only offers fragments without immediate context. Floating sayings and events can only be connected arbitrarily. That means the mind of the scholar, not the reality of Jesus, is governing the reconstruction. Luke Timothy Johnson has made this point effectively:

When the compositions are fragmented, chopped into small pieces, and arranged in arbitrary sequences, they do not work at all. The literary compositions of the New Testament are analyzed best when their literary integrity is respected and appreciated. Approached in this fashion, they can be appreciated as witnesses and interpretations of religious experience and convictions.⁹

ONLY THE GOSPELS REMAIN

Fourth, the portrayal of Jesus in the Gospels of the New Testament is the only portrayal that has any chance of shaping the church and the world over the long haul. This is because it is the only one that people have access to. Whatever the Questers may construct, it will usually be read by only a handful of people. And even if they turn it into a blockbuster movie, seen by millions, that will pass without so much as a memory in ten years, while the Gospels will still be in the hands of the masses. I will wager my life that this was God's idea and that it will be worth all my remaining breath to try to understand what is actually there and teach it faithfully.

MY APPROACH IN THIS BOOK

In addition to what I said about method under the subheading, "A Word About Method" in the Introduction, it may be helpful to point out here that the process of selecting which commands to discuss was complex. I gathered and recorded all the commands by reading the Gospels. This included implied commands (for example, "Blessed are the merciful" implies "Be merciful"). This list was over five hundred, counting the multiple restatements among the Gospels.

⁹Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, 167.

The next step was to distinguish commands that would have abiding significance for faith and life. That is, I excluded commands like “Pick up your bed, and go home” (Mark 2:11). Finally there was a process of grouping and categorizing. After several passes, I was able to include all the commands in about thirty categories. These groupings formed the initial structure of the chapters. Some expanded, and the chapters were divided into two or more. Hence the round number of fifty chapters. I do not claim to have commented on every command. My hope is that enough categories and enough specific commands are handled to give help even for those I may have passed over.

THE JESUS OF THE GOSPELS IS THE MOST RADICAL

The fifth and final reason why reconstructions of Jesus that attempt to go behind the Gospels will not last and will fail to shape the church long-term is that the most radical Jesus is the one portrayed in the Gospels. So many of the reconstructions of Jesus behind the Gospels are motivated by the desire to liberate Jesus from the domesticated traditions of the church that fit Jesus into this world in predictable and compromising ways. That is a good desire. But their approach accomplishes the very opposite of what is hoped for. To the degree that the church is trained to distrust the Jesus of the Gospels and to look for ever new human creations of Christ, the real Jesus is blurred, and his power to break free from the unbiblical traditions that bind him is blunted.

This is the point that Luke Timothy Johnson makes so well: The critical need in the church and the world is the “real Jesus” of the Gospels. Johnson’s words are a fitting conclusion to this Word to Biblical Scholars and a launching pad for *What Jesus Demands from the World*.

Does the church act triumphalistically, or treat its people arrogantly? Is it an agent for the suppression of human needs and aspirations? Does it foster intolerance and small-mindedness? Does the church proclaim a gospel of success and offer Jesus as a

better business partner? Does it encourage an ethos of prosperity to the neglect of the earth's good, or an individualistic spirituality to the neglect of the world's needy? Are its leaders corrupt and coercive? Such distortions of Christianity can find no harsher critic, no more radical rejecter, than the Jesus found *only* in the pages of the New Testament, the Jesus who was himself emptied out for others and called his followers to do the same.

The Jesus to whom Saint Francis of Assisi appealed in his call for a poor and giving rather than a powerful and grasping church was not the Historical Jesus but the Jesus of the Gospels. One must only wonder why this Jesus is not also the "real Jesus" for those who declare a desire for religious truth, and theological integrity, and honest history.¹⁰

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 177.

Demand #1

YOU MUST BE
BORN AGAIN

Jesus answered . . . “Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’”—JOHN 3:5, 7

Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”—JOHN 3:3

In the third chapter of John’s Gospel, Jesus is speaking to “a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews” (John 3:1). Pharisees were the experts in the Jewish Scriptures. This is why Jesus was astonished that Nicodemus was baffled about what Jesus meant by “You must be born again.” Nicodemus asks, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” (John 3:4). Jesus responds, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?” (John 3:10).

A NEW SPIRIT I WILL PUT WITHIN YOU

In other words, an expert in the Jewish Scriptures should not be baffled by Jesus’ demand, “You must be born again.” Why not? Because there are so many clues in the Jewish Scriptures that Jesus and Nicodemus had in common. God had promised a day when he would cause his people to be born again. One of God’s clearest promises is in the book of Ezekiel. Jesus echoed Ezekiel’s words when he said, “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). Being “born again” is

described as a birth from water and Spirit. Those two terms, “water” and “Spirit,” are linked in Ezekiel 36:25-27. God says:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

God promises cleansing from sin and the gift of a new human spirit by the presence of his own divine Spirit. Jesus thinks Nicodemus should make the connection between his demand to be born again and Ezekiel’s promise of a new spirit and the gift of God’s Spirit. But he doesn’t. So Jesus explains further by describing the role of God’s Spirit in bringing about this new spirit: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6).

THE DEAD CANNOT SEE

Flesh is what we are by nature. It refers to ordinary humanity. By our first birth we are only flesh. This natural human condition, as we experience it, is spiritually lifeless. We are not born spiritually alive with a heart that loves God. We are born spiritually dead.

That’s what Jesus implied when he said to a would-be disciple who wanted to go home to a funeral, “Leave the *dead* to bury their own dead” (Luke 9:60). In other words, some are physically dead and need burying. Some are spiritually dead and can bury them. He implied it again when, in his parable of the prodigal son, the father says, “This my son was *dead*, and is alive again” (Luke 15:24). That’s why “unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). The dead can’t see. That is, they can’t see God’s kingdom as supremely desirable. It looks foolish or mythical or boring. So they “cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). They cannot because it is foolishness to them.

Jesus sees all of humanity divided into two parts: those who are merely born once—“born of the flesh,” “the (spiritually) dead”—and those who are “born again” by the Spirit of God—those who are alive to God and see his kingdom as true and supremely desirable.

THE WIND BLOWS WHERE IT WILL

Nicodemus is not entirely wrong to be baffled. There is a mystery. Jesus says so in John 3:8, “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” In other words, “Nicodemus, you need new spiritual life—a second birth.”

And what Jesus demands from Nicodemus, he demands from all. He is speaking to everyone in the world. No one is excluded. No ethnic group has a greater bent toward life. Dead is dead—whatever our color, ethnicity, culture, or class. We need spiritual eyes. Our first birth will not get us into the kingdom of God. But we do not cause ourselves to be born again. The Spirit does that. And the Spirit is free and blows in ways we do not comprehend. We must be born again. But this is a gift of God.

Look away from yourself. Seek from God what he alone can do for you. Moral improvement of the old you is not what you need. New life is what the whole world needs. It is radical and supernatural. It is outside our control. The dead do not give themselves new life. We must be born again—“not . . . of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:13). That is what Jesus demands from the world.