

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

CHRISTOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Person and Work of Christ

UNIT 1: PROLEGOMENA — THE CENTRALITY OF CHRIST IN ALL THEOLOGY

Lesson 2

The Christ of Scripture and the Christ of History

Against the Liberal Quest for the “Historical Jesus”

The Christ Who Is, Not the Christ Liberal Scholarship Wishes He Were

Key Texts: Matthew 16:15–17; 1 Corinthians 15:3–8; 2 Peter 1:16

You Are the Christ, the Son of the Living God

Dr. Joshua Nichols

Pastor, Theologian, Author
faithfultotheword.com

SERIES VERSE

*“For we do not preach ourselves
but Christ Jesus as Lord,
and ourselves as your bond-servants
on account of Jesus.”*

2 CORINTHIANS 4:5, NASB 1995

INTRODUCTION

There is a ghost that has haunted Western theological education for two and a half centuries, and it goes by the respectable name of historical criticism. It began, as most hauntings do, with something that appeared entirely reasonable: the suggestion that the Gospels, like any other ancient documents, ought to be examined with the tools of historical inquiry. Who wrote them? When? For what purpose? What sources did they employ? These are not unreasonable questions. But the movement that arose under this banner, the so-called “quest for the historical Jesus,” was animated from the beginning not by neutral historical curiosity but by a theological agenda: the desire to find, beneath the layers of apostolic testimony and ecclesial tradition, a Jesus more congenial to Enlightenment sensibilities than the one the church had worshipped for seventeen centuries.

The Jesus they sought was a teacher of timeless moral truths, a prophet of social transformation, a sage of inner spiritual experience, anything, in short, except what the New Testament declares Him to be: the eternal Son of God incarnate, the atoning sacrifice for sin, the bodily risen Lord and coming Judge of all the earth. The quest was not, at its heart, a historical enterprise; it was a theological one. It was the attempt to reconstruct Christ in the image of modernity, to domesticate the Lord of glory into a figure that the modern mind could manage without being required to bow.

This lesson is a direct engagement with that project. It is not merely an academic exercise in the history of ideas. The stakes are pastoral and urgent: the Christ that is preached in our pulpits, taught in our classrooms, and proclaimed in our evangelism must be the Christ of Scripture, the Christ who is, in historical reality, precisely who the apostolic witnesses declare Him to be. Every diminishment of that Christ, however sophisticated its scholarly apparatus, produces a Savior who cannot save, a Lord who cannot be followed, a risen one who offers no real hope to the dying. This lesson arms the student to recognize, resist, and refute the liberal reconstruction of Jesus, and to stand with the apostolic confession that has always been the church’s greatest treasure and most urgent proclamation: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16, NASB 1995).

I. THE QUEST FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS: ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT

From Reimarus to the Jesus Seminar, The Anatomy of a Theological Rebellion

A. Hermann Samuel Reimarus and the First Quest

The quest for the historical Jesus is conventionally dated from the posthumous publication of Hermann Samuel Reimarus’s Wolfenbüttel Fragments, edited and released by G.E. Lessing between

1774 and 1778. Reimarus was a Hamburg professor who, privately and at great personal risk, produced a devastating (he intended it to be so) critique of the New Testament portrait of Jesus. His central thesis was that Jesus was a failed Jewish revolutionary who had expected God to establish an earthly messianic kingdom, and whose followers, when He was crucified and the kingdom did not come, fabricated the resurrection and transformed a failed political messiah into a cosmic savior. The disciples, on this account, were deliberate deceivers; the New Testament was a calculated fraud.

Reimarus's thesis was too crude for subsequent scholarship to endorse wholesale, but he had set the agenda: the "real" Jesus lay behind and beneath the New Testament portrait, and the task of the historian was to strip away the theological overlay to recover Him. David Friedrich Strauss's *Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1835) refined the approach considerably, arguing not for deliberate deception but for the unconscious development of myth: the early Christian community, steeped in Old Testament expectations, had projected onto the historical Jesus the mythological categories of messianic hope, producing the supernatural Christ of the Gospels. The Gospels were not lies; they were legends, and therefore equally useless as historical sources for the "real" Jesus.

B. The Liberal Lives of Jesus and Albert Schweitzer's Demolition

The nineteenth century produced a torrent of "Lives of Jesus", scholarly reconstructions of the historical Jesus that, with remarkable consistency, produced a figure who looked very much like a nineteenth-century liberal Protestant. Jesus was a teacher of the universal fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man; He proclaimed the infinite value of the individual soul; He inaugurated an ethical and spiritual kingdom that progressive civilization was in the process of realizing. Adolf von Harnack's *What Is Christianity?* (1900) remains the most eloquent and influential expression of this reconstruction: the essence of Christianity is the simple fatherhood of God and the infinite worth of the human soul, and everything else, the miracles, the atonement, the resurrection, the return, is ecclesiastical accretion.

It was Albert Schweitzer who, in *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906), delivered the fatal blow to the liberal reconstruction, not from a conservative theological position but from the perspective of consistent historical inquiry. Schweitzer demonstrated with devastating clarity that the Jesus of the liberal Lives was a fiction: the historical Jesus was, in fact, a thoroughly apocalyptic Jewish prophet who expected the imminent end of the age and the supernatural establishment of God's kingdom. He was not the genial teacher of universal brotherhood; He was a first-century Jewish eschatologist whose expectations were, by worldly measures, disappointed. Schweitzer's Jesus was no more the Christ of orthodoxy than the liberal Jesus was; but his demolition of the liberal Lives exposed the methodological nakedness of the entire enterprise. The "quests" had not discovered the historical Jesus; they had manufactured a succession of ideological projections.

C. The New Quest, the Third Quest, and the Jesus Seminar

Schweitzer's critique effectively ended the First Quest, but the enterprise did not die; it mutated. Rudolf Bultmann, the most influential New Testament scholar of the twentieth century, concluded from Schweitzer and from form criticism that we can know almost nothing reliable about the historical Jesus. But this did not trouble Bultmann, because he did not think historical knowledge was the proper ground of Christian faith. His program of "demythologization" proposed to strip the New Testament of its mythological worldview, the three-story universe, the supernatural interventions, the bodily resurrection, and reinterpret the kerygma (the proclamation) in terms of existentialist philosophy: the "Christ-event" calls the hearer to authentic existence, regardless of what actually happened in first-century Palestine.

The so-called "New Quest" of the 1950s and the "Third Quest" of the 1980s–2000s represented successive attempts to reconnect Christology to history on critical grounds. The Jesus Seminar, convened by Robert Funk in 1985, achieved cultural notoriety by publishing its color-coded Gospels, in which scholars voted on the authenticity of each saying and deed attributed to Jesus. Their conclusion, that only about eighteen percent of the sayings attributed to Jesus in the Gospels can be considered authentically His, was presented to the public as the conclusion of sober scholarship. It was, in reality, the conclusion of a method shaped by the same Enlightenment presuppositions that had animated Reimarus two centuries earlier: miracles do not happen, the supernatural is a category of myth rather than history, and the Christ of apostolic testimony is a theological construct rather than a historical figure.

"For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty."

2 PETER 1:16, NASB 1995

II. THE ENLIGHTENMENT PRESUPPOSITION: MIRACLES DO NOT HAPPEN

The Philosophical Foundation of the Liberal Quest and Its Fatal Flaw

A. David Hume and the Epistemology of Miracle-Denial

The philosophical engine driving the entire critical enterprise is a principle articulated most influentially by David Hume in his essay "Of Miracles" (1748): a miracle, defined as a violation of a law of nature, is by definition the least probable of all possible explanations for any given event, since the laws of nature represent the accumulated and uniform testimony of human experience. No amount of testimonial evidence for a miracle can overcome the massive inductive probability that the witnesses were deceived or deceiving. Therefore, the historian operating by the canons of

scientific reason is methodologically obligated to explain any allegedly miraculous event in naturalistic terms.

This principle, which Ernst Troeltsch later systematized as the principle of analogy, historical events can only be understood by analogy with events occurring in our present experience, became the methodological cornerstone of the historical-critical enterprise. It is not a historical conclusion; it is a philosophical presupposition. It does not follow from the evidence; it is brought to the evidence. The critic who begins with the assumption that miracles cannot happen will inevitably conclude, regardless of the evidence, that miracles did not happen. The resurrection of Christ, the virgin birth, the healings and exorcisms, the walking on water, all of these must be explained away, not because the evidence for them is weak, but because the presupposed philosophical framework cannot accommodate them.

B. The Orthodox Response: Methodological Naturalism Is Not Neutral

The orthodox response to Hume's principle is not to abandon historical inquiry but to expose the philosophical question-begging that underlies it. The claim that miracles cannot happen is not a historical conclusion derived from evidence; it is a metaphysical claim about the nature of reality. It assumes that the natural order is causally closed, that no agent external to the natural system can intervene in it, that the God of Christian theism either does not exist or does not act. But these are precisely the claims that are in dispute. To assume them as methodological axioms, and then to present the conclusions that follow as the findings of neutral historical science, is not scholarship; it is philosophical imperialism dressed in academic regalia.

The Christian historian operates with a different but equally coherent set of metaphysical commitments: that the God who created the natural order is not bound by it, that divine action in history is not a violation of nature but its sovereign governance by the One who established its regularities, and that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is, on the available evidence, the most historically credible explanation for the origins of the Christian movement. The question is not whether one has presuppositions, every historian does, but whether one's presuppositions are philosophically defensible and honestly acknowledged.

III. THE ORTHODOX RESPONSE: THE CHRIST OF SCRIPTURE IS THE CHRIST OF HISTORY

The Reliability of the Gospels and the Impossibility of the Legendary Development Hypothesis

A. The Eyewitness Testimony of the Apostolic Witnesses

The apostolic claim is not that the New Testament is the product of a community's evolving theological reflection on a dimly remembered figure from the past. It is the claim of eyewitness testimony. Peter's declaration in 2 Peter 1:16 is the paradigmatic statement of the apostolic self-understanding: "For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty" (NASB 1995). The language is deliberate and polemical: cleverly devised tales (σεσοφισμένοις μύθοις, *sesophismenois mythois*) is precisely the kind of language one would use to describe the legendary developments that the critical tradition attributes to the early Christian community. Peter is denying, with apostolic authority, that this is what the Gospel tradition represents.

Richard Bauckham's landmark study *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (2006) has done the scholarly community the immense service of demonstrating what careful historiography should always have recognized: the Gospels are not the products of anonymous community tradition but are connected, in ways that can be historically traced, to specific named eyewitnesses. The prominence of named characters in the Gospel accounts, Peter, Mary Magdalene, Bartimaeus, Simon of Cyrene, Cleopas, reflects the early church's practice of identifying the living guarantors of the tradition. These are not literary conventions; they are the markers of eyewitness testimony in an oral culture that took seriously the question of where the stories came from and who stood behind them.

B. The Early Dating of the Gospel Tradition

The legendary development hypothesis requires time. Legends do not spring up overnight; they require generations of retelling, the gradual fading of eyewitness memory, and the absence of witnesses who could challenge the embellishments. The critical tradition has historically assumed the late dating of the Gospels, Mark in the 70s, Matthew and Luke in the 80s, John at the end of the first century, and has treated this as providing sufficient time for the theological elaboration of an originally simpler tradition. But even on these dates, the situation is far more unfavorable for the legendary development hypothesis than the critics have acknowledged.

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, universally dated to around AD 55, contains in 1 Corinthians 15:3–8 a creedal formulation that Paul explicitly identifies as tradition he had "received", material, that is, that antedates even his own letter. "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve" (NASB 1995). The majority of New Testament scholars, including many who hold critical views, date the origin of this creedal formula to within two to five years of the crucifixion. There is simply no time for the kind of legendary development that the critical tradition requires.

C. The Criterion of Embarrassment and the Historical Bedrock

Among the criteria developed by critical scholarship itself for assessing the historical reliability of Gospel traditions, none is more probative than the criterion of embarrassment: material that would

have been embarrassing or inconvenient for the early church is unlikely to have been invented by the early church. On this criterion, some of the most theologically significant elements of the Gospel narrative have the strongest historical claim to authenticity. Jesus's baptism by John, a ritual associated with repentance from sin, performed on the sinless Son of God, was so theologically awkward that Matthew felt compelled to address it directly (Matthew 3:14–15). The crucifixion under Pontius Pilate, the most shameful and degrading form of execution in the Roman world, was hardly the kind of fate a community would invent for its founder and Lord. The earliest post-resurrection appearances to women, whose testimony was inadmissible in a Jewish court of law, are precisely what a community fabricating a resurrection story would not have chosen as its first witnesses.

When the evidence is honestly assessed, the early dating of the tradition, the eyewitness connections of the Gospel accounts, the criterion of embarrassment, the historical implausibility of the legendary development hypothesis, the failure of every naturalistic alternative to account for the origin of the resurrection faith, the conclusion that the critical tradition resists is the one that the evidence actually supports: the Christ of Scripture and the Christ of history are the same Person. The one whom the Gospels present, who healed the sick, raised the dead, calmed the storm, died on the cross, and rose bodily from the tomb, is not a theological projection; He is the one who actually lived, actually died, and actually rose.

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was raised on the third day.”

1 CORINTHIANS 15:3–4, NASB 1995

IV. A RECONSTRUCTED JESUS CANNOT SAVE

The Theological Stakes of the Historical Question

A. Every Diminishment of Christ Produces a Diminished Gospel

The liberal reconstruction of Jesus is not merely a historical error; it is a soteriological catastrophe. The critical project has consistently produced a Jesus who is morally admirable, spiritually profound, and religiously inspiring, and entirely incapable of doing what the New Testament declares He has done. A Jesus who did not rise bodily from the dead cannot be “the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25). A Jesus who did not die as an atoning sacrifice for sin cannot be “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). A Jesus who is not the eternal Son of God incarnate cannot mediate between God and man, because only one who is fully God and fully man can stand in the mediatorial position that sinners require.

Paul understood this with absolute clarity, and he stated it with absolute directness: “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins” (1 Corinthians 15:17, NASB 1995). The resurrection is not a dispensable mythological symbol for the eternal truth of the human spirit’s triumph over mortality; it is the *sine qua non* of the gospel. Without it, there is no gospel, only a moral philosophy attached to the memory of a martyred rabbi. Bultmann’s demythologized Christ can inspire existentialist authenticity; he cannot forgive sins. The Jesus Seminar’s reconstructed sage can offer aphoristic wisdom; he cannot justify the ungodly. The liberal Jesus is, for all his spiritual attractiveness, a Savior with no power to save.

B. The Confession That Has Always Been the Church’s Life

The church has always known that its life depends on the identity of its Lord. The question Jesus asked at Caesarea Philippi, “But who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:15, NASB 1995), is not merely the central question of Christology; it is the central question of Christian existence. The answer Peter gave, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16, NASB 1995), is the answer on which Christ declared He would build His church and against which the gates of Hades would not prevail (Matthew 16:18).

Notice that Jesus does not commend Peter for the quality of his historical reasoning or the sophistication of his source criticism. He commends him for a confession that has its origin not in the conclusions of unaided human inquiry but in divine revelation: “Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 16:17, NASB 1995). The knowledge of Christ that is the foundation of the church is not the product of the historical-critical method; it is the gift of the Father, communicated through the apostolic witness of Scripture and applied to the heart by the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit. This does not make it irrational or ahistorical; it makes it certain in a way that historical inference alone can never achieve.

V. METHODOLOGY FOR THIS SERIES: THE CHRIST WHO IS

How We Will Study Christ and Why It Matters That We Study Him Rightly

The methodological commitment of this Christology series is simple and non-negotiable: we study the Christ who is, as He has revealed Himself in the inspired and inerrant pages of Holy Scripture, interpreted according to the rules of grammatical-historical exegesis, informed by the exegetical tradition of the church, and received with the faith and adoration that the subject demands. We do not approach the Gospels with a hermeneutic of suspicion, as if the apostolic witnesses were ideologically motivated distorters of a truth we must recover from beneath their testimony. We approach them with a hermeneutic of trust, recognizing that the God who inspired these documents

has guaranteed their truthfulness and that the Christ they present is the Christ who actually lived, died, and rose.

This does not mean we are naive about the existence of historical and textual questions, or that we refuse to engage with the critical tradition. On the contrary: this series will engage the critical tradition directly and repeatedly, because the challenges it raises are real challenges that the church's ministry will encounter in the pulpit, in the university classroom, in pastoral counseling, and in evangelistic conversation. But we engage it from a position of confidence rather than anxiety, because the evidence, honestly and thoroughly assessed, supports the apostolic testimony rather than undermining it. The Christ of Scripture does not need to be defended from history; He needs to be presented to it.

The great apologist and theologian J. Gresham Machen, writing in *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923) with a clarity that has not been surpassed in the century since, put the matter with characteristic precision: "The liberal attempt at reconciling Christianity with modern science has really relinquished everything distinctive of Christianity, so that what remains is in essentials only that same indefinite type of religious aspiration which was in the world before Christianity came upon the scene." Liberal Christianity is not a form of Christianity that has been updated for the modern mind; it is a different religion that has borrowed Christian vocabulary. The Christ it commends is not the Christ of the apostles. And the Christ of the apostles, the eternal Son of God who became flesh, died for our sins, rose bodily from the dead, and will come again in glory, is the only Christ who can do what sinners need done.

"But who do you say that I am?" | "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

MATTHEW 16:15–16, NASB 1995

VI. THE DOXOLOGICAL CONCLUSION: HISTORY IN THE SERVICE OF WORSHIP

The engagement with the liberal quest for the historical Jesus that this lesson has undertaken is not, in the end, an academic exercise. It is an act of pastoral and doxological urgency. The Christ who is presented in the New Testament, who is the same yesterday and today and forever (Hebrews 13:8), who upholds all things by the word of His power (Hebrews 1:3), who has sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high (Hebrews 1:3), is worthy of a faith more certain and a worship more ardent than the questing scholars ever supposed. The task of Christology is not to negotiate between this Christ and the demands of modern scholarship; it is to present this Christ to the world with the full force of the apostolic testimony that stands behind Him.

When Thomas fell before the risen Christ and confessed “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28, NASB 1995), he was not making a claim that required the validation of historical-critical methodology. He was doing what every creature made in the image of God is made to do: recognizing the Lord of glory and prostrating himself before Him. The quest for the historical Jesus has, for two and a half centuries, attempted to replace that prostration with a scholarly shrug. This series refuses the shrug. The Christ of Scripture is the Christ of history, the Christ of the apostolic proclamation, the Christ of the Nicene Creed, and the Christ of living faith. He is worthy of our most rigorous intellectual engagement, and He is worthy of our most adoring worship. And in the end, as every genuine encounter with the living Christ demonstrates, those two things are not different.

Key Texts: *Matthew 16:15–17; 1 Corinthians 15:3–8; 2 Peter 1:16; John 20:28; Hebrews 1:1–4*

THEOLOGICAL TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Term	Definition
Historical Criticism	The application of the methods of modern historical inquiry to the biblical texts, including source criticism (identifying literary sources behind the text), form criticism (analyzing the oral forms behind the written sources), redaction criticism (studying the editorial activity of the Gospel writers), and tradition criticism (tracing the development of tradition from its origins to its final literary form). Historical criticism is not inherently hostile to Christian orthodoxy; it becomes so when it operates on the presupposition that miracles cannot occur and that the apostolic portrait of Christ is a theological construct rather than reliable testimony.
Quest for the Historical Jesus	The scholarly enterprise, originating in the late eighteenth century and continuing in various forms to the present, that seeks to reconstruct the ‘real’ Jesus lying behind the New Testament portrait. The First Quest (Reimarus to Schweitzer) attempted to recover a non-supernatural Jesus from beneath the theological overlay of the Gospels. The Second Quest (post-Bultmann, 1950s) sought to connect faith and history on existentialist grounds. The Third Quest (1980s–2000s) placed Jesus within his Jewish context, often undermining rather than recovering traditional Christology. Each Quest has been driven more by the theological commitments of its practitioners than by neutral historical inquiry.
Demythologization	The program of Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) for interpreting the New Testament, which proposed to strip the Gospel narrative of its mythological worldview, the three-story cosmology, the supernatural interventions, the bodily resurrection, and reinterpret the existential call of the kerygma in terms of Heideggerian philosophy. The resurrection, on Bultmann’s account, is not a

Term	Definition
	historical event but a symbol of the believer's willingness to surrender security and embrace authentic existence. Demythologization does not preserve the gospel in modern dress; it destroys the gospel by removing its historical foundation.
Principle of Analogy	Ernst Troeltsch's formulation of the methodological presupposition underlying historical-critical inquiry: historical events can only be understood by analogy with events that occur in our present experience. Since miraculous events do not occur in our present experience (as the critic assumes), they cannot have occurred in the past. The principle of analogy is not a historical conclusion; it is a metaphysical assumption imported into historical inquiry. Orthodox historiography challenges the assumption, not by abandoning the use of analogy but by insisting that an open universe, one in which a personal Creator can act within His creation, is philosophically coherent and historically warranted.
Criterion of Embarrassment	One of the criteria developed by historical-critical scholarship for assessing the authenticity of Gospel traditions: material that would have been embarrassing, inconvenient, or contrary to the theological interests of the early church is unlikely to have been invented by the early church. The criterion is one of the most probative tools in the critical arsenal, and it consistently supports the authenticity of the most historically and theologically significant elements of the Gospel narrative: the baptism of Jesus by John, the crucifixion, the appearances first to women, the failure of the disciples to understand.
Eyewitness Testimony	The claim of the apostolic witnesses that their proclamation of Christ rests not on theological inference or legendary development but on direct personal encounter with the historical Jesus, including the post-resurrection appearances. The paradigmatic New Testament statement is 2 Peter 1:16: 'We were eyewitnesses of His majesty.' Richard Bauckham's <i>Jesus and the Eyewitnesses</i> (2006) has demonstrated the connection between the named characters in the Gospel narratives and the eyewitness sources behind the texts, providing strong historical grounds for the reliability of the apostolic testimony.
Kerygma	Greek: 'proclamation.' The technical term, popularized by C.H. Dodd and Rudolf Bultmann, for the core apostolic proclamation that underlies the New Testament writings: the death, burial, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus Christ, and the call to faith and repentance in response. The earliest recoverable form of the kerygma is found in 1 Corinthians 15:3–8, which Paul identifies as tradition he had 'received' and passed on, a creedal formulation that most scholars date within two to five years of the crucifixion. The antiquity of the kerygma is fatal to the legendary development hypothesis.

Term	Definition
Legend / Myth	In the context of the quest for the historical Jesus, the category applied by critical scholars to elements of the Gospel narrative deemed historically unreliable: supernatural events, miracle accounts, the exalted christological titles, the resurrection. The application of these categories to the Gospel narrative is not a historical finding but a philosophical presupposition: the critic assumes that the miraculous cannot be historical and therefore classifies the miraculous as legendary. The orthodox response is not to deny the category of legend in principle but to insist that its application to the Gospel tradition requires evidence, not merely the assumption that miracles do not happen.
J. Gresham Machen	American Presbyterian theologian (1881–1937), professor at Princeton Theological Seminary and founder of Westminster Theological Seminary, whose <i>Christianity and Liberalism</i> (1923) remains the most penetrating analysis of the difference between orthodox Christianity and liberal Protestantism. Machen argued that theological liberalism is not a form of Christianity adapted to the modern mind but a fundamentally different religion that has borrowed Christian vocabulary while abandoning Christian substance. His analysis of the liberal reconstruction of Jesus anticipated and illuminates every subsequent form of the critical enterprise.
Hermeneutic of Trust	The interpretive posture that approaches the Gospel narratives as reliable apostolic testimony to historical events, rather than as ideologically motivated theological constructs requiring critical deconstruction. The hermeneutic of trust is not naïve, it does not ignore historical and textual questions, but it does not begin with the assumption that the witnesses are unreliable. It reflects the conviction that the God who inspired the Scriptures has guaranteed their truthfulness, and that the Christ they present is the Christ who actually lived, died, and rose. It stands in contrast to the hermeneutic of suspicion that has characterized the historical-critical tradition.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the historical reliability of the Gospels is not a naïve assumption that can only be sustained by those who have not engaged the critical tradition, but a well-grounded conviction that emerges from a thorough and honest engagement with the evidence. The early dating of the creedal tradition, the eyewitness connections of the Gospel accounts, the criterion of embarrassment, and the historical failure of every naturalistic alternative to account for the origin of the resurrection faith all support the apostolic testimony. The pastor and teacher who has worked through these arguments is not intellectually embarrassed by the critical tradition; he is equipped to engage it.

We must also believe that the philosophical presuppositions of the historical-critical method are not the deliverances of neutral reason but the commitments of a particular worldview, one that is coherent within its own terms but that is not self-evidently correct, and that requires challenge rather than capitulation. The methodological naturalism that underlies the critical enterprise is a philosophical position, not a historical finding. The Christian scholar who exposes its philosophical foundations and defends the coherence of a theistic historiography is not retreating from reason; he is demanding that reason be applied honestly to the question of its own presuppositions.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

Let this lesson produce in you a deeper gratitude for the historical groundedness of the Christian faith. Christianity is not a religion of timeless ideas or spiritual experiences that float free of history; it is a religion of events, specific, datable, publicly accessible events in the history of first-century Palestine. This is simultaneously its greatest vulnerability (it can, in principle, be falsified by history) and its greatest strength (it is grounded in realities that are not dependent on the believer's experience or the community's theology). The apostle Paul understood this: "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless" (1 Corinthians 15:17, NASB 1995). Paul is not afraid of that conditionality; he is confident of the historical fact that fills it.

Desire also a Christ who is too large and too real to be managed by the categories of any scholarly reconstruction. The liberal quest has consistently produced a Jesus who is, in Albert Schweitzer's famous image, a reflection of the face of the scholar looking down the well of history. The Christ of the New Testament is not a reflection; He is the one who stood on the shore of Galilee and called fishermen to leave their nets, who wept at the tomb of Lazarus, who sweat drops of blood in the garden of Gethsemane, and who said to the weeping women outside the empty tomb: "Do not be afraid; go and take word to My brethren to leave for Galilee, and there they will see Me" (Matthew 28:10, NASB 1995). No reconstruction can contain Him.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Read the primary sources of the historical-critical tradition. You cannot engage what you have not read. Begin with Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906), the most penetrating internal critique of the liberal enterprise, written by one of its most brilliant practitioners. Then read J. Gresham Machen's *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923) for the definitive orthodox response. These two books together will give you a more accurate picture of the debate than most seminary curricula provide.
- Master the evidential case for the resurrection. N.T. Wright's *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (2003) is the most thorough and rigorously historical treatment of the resurrection available; Gary Habermas and Michael Licona's *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (2004) provides a more accessible presentation of the minimal facts argument. The pastor who has

worked through these arguments has at his disposal the most powerful single piece of historical evidence for the truth of the Christian gospel.

- Engage the critical tradition in your preaching and teaching, directly, honestly, and without anxiety. The congregation that never hears its pastor engage the objections of the critical tradition is a congregation that will be poorly equipped when those objections are encountered in the university, in the workplace, or in the pages of a popular bestseller. Inoculate your people by teaching them the arguments, not by pretending the challenges do not exist.
- Read Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (2006). This is one of the most important works of New Testament scholarship produced in the last quarter-century, and it has fundamentally shifted the terms of the historical debate in favor of the apostolic testimony. Its argument is technical but accessible, and it provides the historically literate pastor with an authoritative resource for engaging the eyewitness question.
- Pray for those who have been wounded by the critical tradition. Many students who have passed through universities and seminaries saturated with historical criticism have had their faith in the Christ of Scripture shaken or destroyed, not because the evidence demanded it, but because the philosophical presuppositions of the tradition were presented as historical conclusions and no one equipped them to see the difference. Pray for those people, and let this lesson move you to ensure that your own ministry produces believers who are grounded in the historical reality of Jesus Christ.

STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

OPENING QUESTION

1. Have you ever encountered the claim that the “historical Jesus” is different from the “Christ of faith” presented in the New Testament? Where did you encounter it (university course, popular book, conversation, documentary), and how did it affect you? What resources, if any, helped you engage with or respond to the claim?

OBSERVATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DO THE TEXTS SAY?)

2. Read 1 Corinthians 15:3–11. What specific claims does Paul identify as “of first importance” in verses 3–4? What is the significance of Paul’s language that he “received” this material and “delivered” it to the Corinthians? What does the list of post-resurrection appearances in verses 5–8 contribute to Paul’s argument?

3. Read 2 Peter 1:12–18. What is the specific claim Peter makes about the nature of the apostolic testimony in verse 16? What experience does he cite as evidence in verses 17–18? What is the relationship between eyewitness testimony and the prophetic word (v. 19) in Peter’s argument?
4. Read Matthew 16:13–20. How does Jesus distinguish between the popular identifications of Him (v. 14) and Peter’s confession (v. 16)? What does Jesus’ statement in verse 17, that “flesh and blood did not reveal this” to Peter, imply about the nature and source of genuine Christological knowledge? What does He promise to build on this confessional foundation (v. 18)?
5. Read John 20:24–29. What was Thomas’s initial response to the testimony of the other disciples (v. 25)? What evidence does he demand? How does Jesus respond to his demand (v. 27), and what does Thomas’s confession in verse 28 represent? What does Jesus’ pronouncement in verse 29 imply about the relationship between evidence, faith, and blessing?

INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DOES IT MEAN?)

6. The lesson argues that the quest for the historical Jesus was animated not by neutral historical curiosity but by a theological agenda: the desire to find a Jesus more congenial to Enlightenment sensibilities. Do you agree with this assessment? What evidence does the lesson provide for this claim? What methodological lesson should the Christian historian draw from this about the relationship between presuppositions and historical conclusions?
7. Albert Schweitzer demolished the liberal Lives of Jesus by showing that they had produced a figure who looked like a nineteenth-century liberal Protestant rather than a first-century Jewish prophet. What methodological principle does Schweitzer’s critique illustrate? Why is it important that Schweitzer’s critique came from within the critical tradition rather than from a conservative theological position?
8. The lesson distinguishes between a hermeneutic of trust and a hermeneutic of suspicion in the interpretation of the Gospels. What are the theological and philosophical presuppositions of each approach? Is it possible to use the tools of historical criticism while operating with a hermeneutic of trust? What would that look like in practice?
9. Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 15:17, “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins”, makes the historical resurrection the indispensable foundation of Christian faith. What does this imply about the relationship between history and theology in the Christian understanding of salvation? Why is Bultmann’s attempt to ground faith in a non-historical Christ-event ultimately inadequate?
10. The lesson argues that methodological naturalism, the assumption that the natural order is causally closed and that miracles cannot occur, is a philosophical presupposition, not a historical finding. Do you find this argument convincing? How should the Christian scholar acknowledge and

defend his own presuppositions without retreating into a fideism that refuses to engage the historical evidence?

APPLICATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DOES IT DEMAND OF US?)

- 11.** The lesson states that the congregation which never hears its pastor engage the critical tradition will be poorly equipped when those challenges are encountered outside the church. How do you currently prepare your congregation to engage the historical-critical challenges to the reliability of the Gospels? What specific steps could you take in your preaching and teaching to provide better preparation?
- 12.** The apologetic case for the historicity of the resurrection, the minimal facts argument, the criterion of embarrassment, the early dating of the creedal tradition, provides the historically literate pastor with powerful resources for engagement with skeptics. How fluent are you currently with these arguments? What would a realistic plan for deepening your apologetic competency in this area look like over the next twelve months?
- 13.** J. Gresham Machen argued that theological liberalism is not a form of Christianity adapted for the modern mind but a fundamentally different religion. In your own pastoral context, where do you encounter the influence of the liberal reconstruction of Jesus, in popular books, media, the questions of parishioners, the training of clergy, or the practice of neighboring churches? How do you engage that influence?
- 14.** This lesson has argued that the Christ of Scripture and the Christ of history are the same Person, and that the evidence supports this identification. Has the study of this lesson deepened your confidence in the historical reliability of the Gospel testimony? What single argument or piece of evidence do you find most compelling, and why? How will you incorporate it into your ministry?

PRAYER FOCUS

Open this lesson's prayer time with a reading of 1 Corinthians 15:1–11, the earliest creedal formulation of the apostolic gospel, the bedrock on which two thousand years of Christian proclamation has rested. Read it slowly, with the awareness that these words were written within a generation of the events they describe, by a man who had personally met the risen Christ on the road to Damascus and who had received this tradition from those who had been with Jesus before him. Let the historical concreteness of the passage, the specific names, the specific appearances, the specific claim that more than five hundred witnesses saw the risen Christ at one time, most of whom were still alive when Paul wrote, press upon the group with its full evidential and doxological weight.

Spend time in adoration of the Lord Jesus Christ as the historically real, bodily risen, eternally living Son of God. Not the Jesus of the liberal reconstruction, the teacher of timeless spiritual truths, but the Jesus who actually walked the roads of Galilee, actually wept at the tomb of Lazarus, actually sweat blood in the garden, actually cried out from the cross, and actually walked out of the tomb on the third day. The God we worship is not a symbol; He is a Person. The salvation we proclaim is not a spiritual metaphor; it is a historical event with cosmic consequences. Let the historicity of the gospel be a source not of anxiety but of confidence and praise.

Pray specifically for those in your congregation and community who have been unsettled by the critical tradition, students who have encountered the historical-critical challenges in university classrooms, readers who have been troubled by popular books claiming that the “real” Jesus has been concealed by the church, believers whose faith has been shaken by documentary films presenting critical scholarship as settled consensus. Pray that God would raise up pastors, scholars, and teachers equipped to engage these challenges with both intellectual rigor and pastoral gentleness.

Pray also for the integrity and confidence of your own proclamation. The pastor who is not certain about the historical reality of the One he preaches will inevitably hedge, qualify, and soften his proclamation in ways that drain it of its power and undermine its credibility. Ask God for the settled conviction that the Christ of Scripture is the Christ of history, that the one you preach is real, that the one you worship is present, that the one you trust has actually done what the gospel declares He has done, and that this conviction would produce in your ministry a boldness and a certainty that commends the gospel to those who are watching.

Close with the great christological confession that has been the church’s answer to every version of the liberal quest, spoken together not as a historical claim to be defended but as a living confession to be made:

“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

MATTHEW 16:16, NASB 1995

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Dr. Joshua Nichols

josh@faithfultotheword.com | faithfultotheword.com