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The Spirit of Jesus versus Christianity

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The Scandal of the Spirit of Jesus

**Be like Jesus, this my song,
In the home and in the throng. 1**

So goes the well-known song which embodies the pious sentiment urged in all branches of the Christian religion. Whether one is a Lutheran, Baptist, Mennonite, Calvinist, Methodist or Adventist makes no difference. “Be like Jesus” seems to mean becoming a more faithful disciple of one’s own religious system. Imagine a pacifist group urging its members, “Be like Rambo,” in order to make them more meek and more submissive than ever!

A few years ago *Christianity Today* included a similar comical irony in its cartoon series entitled “What If?” Two officials standing at the entrance to St. Paul’s Church were looking apprehensively down the road. Coming toward the church was an apostolic character with bald head and beard. One official was saying to the other, “I know he’s St. Paul, but is it safe to let him in?”

Is it safe for the Christian churches to let the Spirit of Jesus in? Not really! As James Barr declares, “The Jesus of the Gospels says and does so many things that are uncharacteristic of what Christianity— in its various forms— later came to be.” 2 To really be like Jesus would not make people better Lutherans, Baptists, Catholics or Presbyterians. The Spirit of Jesus would make them bad Christians— a threat, a scandal and an embarrassment to every religious system within Christianity.

The Spirit of Jesus and the New Testament Documents

The New Testament documents are the primary witness to Jesus. They bear witness to something far greater than their mere letter. If we are to be gripped by the amazing spirit of this Man, we need to appreciate that *letter* can never adequately or even accurately portray *spirit*. If we do not recognize the severe limitations and obvious imperfections of these documents, our grasp of the transcendent spirit of Jesus, will be narrow and truncated.

The apostle Paul confessed, “We have this treasure in earthen vessels” (2 Cor. 4:7, RSV). He obviously included his own New Testament letters. Luther aptly likened Scripture to the swaddling clothes which contained the Christ. Dear is the treasure; lowly is that which contains it.

In our scientific age the documents of the New Testament have been subjected to

intense scrutiny. If we may use Paul's analogy of "earthen vessels," it is as though some ancient clay jars from the first-century Mediterranean world were being subjected to scientific examination. One examiner is intrigued by hairline cracks; another by evidence of faulty pottery-making technique. But because the jars are holy relics, reports of these discoveries are met with a hail of protest. "Haven't the jars a special, heavenly origin? They couldn't possibly have any cracks or faults." At least this is the presupposition of the faithful. Most, of course, refuse to even examine the evidence before their eyes but accept the perfection of the jars on the strength of religious authority. Even when a few of their own trusted religious scholars dare to reexamine the jars, they tell the faithful what they want to hear—that the scientists have only been fooled by the so-called hairline cracks and faults, because they are actually part of the jars' intricate and perfect design.

The same thing occurs when the swaddling clothes are examined. Close inspection shows clumsy, even faulty needlework. But defenders of the holy relics insist that these garments were woven in the loom of heaven and contain no thread of human devising.

Such is the debate which has surrounded the battle for the Bible in recent years. If the treasure contained in the clay jars or swaddling clothes has not been wholly forgotten, it has certainly not been enhanced by conservative reaction. For, there is a spirit about this Jesus of Nazareth which obviously transcends the frail, stumbling witnesses. Efforts to absolve the documents from human imperfections do not highlight the transcendent grandeur of Jesus but diminish it.

Let us suppose someone reports that he has seen something stupendously, breathtakingly, unimaginably great. We ask him, "Can you accurately and adequately describe it to us?" If he says, "Yes!" we can safely conclude that it is not as great as he claims. The New Testament documents witness to something transcendent. One of them says that all the books of the world could not adequately portray it (John 21:25). Another says that it is immeasurably greater than anything we can imagine. It surpasses knowledge (Eph. 3:19, 20) and cannot be verbalized (Rom. 8:26; 1 Cor. 2:9). It can only be seen as a "poor reflection" (1 Cor. 13:12).

The spirit of Jesus is much greater than the letter of the witnesses. Despite New Testament inconsistencies and efforts to diminish the radical freedom of Jesus' spirit and reshape and fit him to their early church situations, the witnesses cannot reduce him to a manageable size. Sometimes the true spirit of Jesus shines through, not because of their accurate reporting, but by contrast to the evidence of a churchmanship which bent the tradition to serve the situation of the developing church. There is evidence that the early church, which produced the New Testament documents, failed to fulfill the aims and intentions of Jesus. Led by the apostles at Jerusalem, they retreated from the breathtaking freedom of Jesus' spirit and tried to

reduce him to the size of their vision for the church.

From the very beginning the Christian church exhibited ascetic tendencies and an escape from the real world which were so unlike the spirit of the real Jesus. Before a century had passed, documents such as The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, The Shepherd of Hermas, The Epistle of Barnabas and the letters of Ignatius witnessed to a morbid, repressive, world-hating asceticism that breathed through the Christian religion. The church's attitude toward women and human sexuality was appalling. In these respects Christianity was inferior to Judaism, which was much more life-affirming. As Christianity made its relentless march forward to conquer the Roman world, one of its great enemies conceded defeat with the famous lament, "O pale Galilean, you have conquered." Why was the Galilean associated with this dull-gray image, this pall of gloom which spread across civilization? While it is true that this represents a corruption or departure from the primitive New Testament witness, we cannot truthfully claim that these ascetic, morbid and repressive elements of Christianity were not mediated by the primitive church and the New Testament documents which it produced.

However, if we insist that the church's New Testament documents accurately and infallibly express the intent of Jesus in every way, we are in serious trouble. For Jesus came with the electrifying promise of God's reign, and lo, what appears is this Christian church!

While the New Testament witness to Jesus is absolutely necessary and irreplaceable, the spirit of Jesus is greater than these witnesses. They themselves must stand under the judgment of the spirit of Jesus and be interpreted and, if necessary, corrected in light of his gospel.

The Catholicity of the Spirit of Jesus

Jesus was born into a religious cult. We use the term *cult* in its proper technical sense. The Jewish cult was defined by the practice of Torah piety. For members of the cult the Jewish Halakha embodied the tradition of right behavior. The most prominent features which distinguished the Jew from the rest of mankind were circumcision, Sabbath-keeping and kosher food. The cultic code made it impossible for Jews to eat with non-Jews. Thus, those inside the cult were clearly isolated institutionally, legally and behaviorally from those outside the cult.

In order to grasp the force and application of Christian history, we need to realize that the church became the Christian cult. Not only behaviorally, but institutionally and legally, those inside the Christian cult were distinguished from the rest of humanity. The division of Christianity has involved the development of organized sects such as

the Catholic cult, the Lutheran cult, the Presbyterian cult and the Methodist cult. Of course, none of these cults lives by the Jewish Halakha. Instead, there is a Lutheran Halakha, a Baptist Halakha, an Adventist Halakha, etc.

By birth Jesus was a member of the Jewish religious cult— born under the law” (Gal. 4:4, RSV), “descended from David according to the flesh” (Rom. 1:3, RSV). But Jesus’ spirit was the antithesis of the cultic spirit. His amazing catholicity of spirit threatened the cult’s very existence.

The cult not only places labels on its own members; it labels the rest of mankind. These labels— Pharisee, Galilean, tax collector, sinner, Samaritan, Gentile— determined the way every good Jew was expected to relate to such people. But in his relationship with people, Jesus ignored labels and acted as though they did not exist. He brought healing and the spirit of reconciliation to people where they were. He never asked them to recite a creed or confession before he healed or forgave them.

Jesus often spoke well of the enemies of the Jewish cult. He had a good word for the Samaritan, the Roman centurion and the Syrophenician woman. In fact, he dared to say that their faith was superior to anything he had found within the cult. Such talk, even in his own congregation at Nazareth, nearly got him murdered. What if a leading evangelical today should dine with a well-known Mafia figure in Chicago and enthusiastically call him a born-again son of God? What if this leading evangelical should then go to Saudi Arabia to fellowship with a Muslim, and to Burma to have a marvelous exchange with a Buddhist? What if he should then declare that in these non-Christians he had encountered a faith superior to anything he had found in the Christian cult? Would not Christians everywhere greet his remarks with strident protest? Would he not be threatened with expulsion from the evangelical cult?

It is clear that Jesus felt more at home among nonreligious people than among religious people. Some of his best friends were Galileans (whose cavalier attitude toward the Law was renowned), outright sinners and, worst of all, tax collectors. He banqueted with them so frequently that he gained the reputation of being a wine-drinking gourmand. Jesus social habits were not only an offense against good taste; they were a flagrant transgression of Torah piety. In Jesus’ day sharing a meal was not merely a gesture of diplomatic friendship.

To understand what Jesus was doing in eating with ‘sinners’, it is important to realize that in the east, even today, to invite a man to a meal was an honor, It was an offer of peace, trust, brotherhood and forgiveness; in short, sharing a table meant sharing life...In Judaism in particular, table-fellowship means fellowship before God, for the eating of a piece of broken bread by everyone who shares in the meal brings out the fact that they all have a share in the blessing which the master of the house had spoken over the unbroken bread. 3

Jesus was announcing that the reign of God was at hand. As promised in the Old

Testament, the reign of God is synonymous with the blessing of eschatological salvation. The prophet Isaiah looked forward to this liberation banquet when God himself would provide “the best of meats and the finest of wines” (Isa. 25:6). In announcing the arrival of this eschatological jubilee in which the poor are released from all debt and the oppressed from all bondage, Jesus must seal his message with liberation banquets. This is why he came as the eating and drinking Man who forbade his disciples to fast according to the custom of the cult. Soon Abraham, Isaac and Jacob would join the celebration. It is like Washington, D.C. during the week of the Presidential inauguration. Although the final inaugural ball has yet to take place, a mood of celebration is sweeping the city, and the preliminary parties all anticipate the great final party.

That Jesus eats with the oppressed, the tax collectors, the prostitutes and those outside the pale of Torah piety signals that God’s fellowship, forgiveness and end-time salvation are lavished on sinners with scandalous generosity. Rather than a long, gloomy repentance being a condition of fellowship with God, that fellowship brings a repentance of joy. Repentance is difficult for the good people inside the cult but astonishingly easy for those so overwhelmed by their own helplessness and powerlessness that they are open to God’s gift.

It is not difficult to see that at these banquets with the nonreligious, Jesus was the life of the party. He was no “Bible-banger” but told stories which were entertaining and often outrageously funny. Is anything so humorous as fanatical, cultic elitism in which the pious take their own piety so seriously? The stories of Jesus lampooned the piety of religious people and made sinners laugh at their undreamed-of good fortune. But the pious who took their religion so seriously were enraged by the festive spirit of the gospel.

This catholic spirit of Jesus ignoring cultic distinctions, praising the faith of those not supposed to have faith and fellowshiping with those not supposed to have fellowship— was the very antithesis of the cultic spirit. It called the cult’s *raison d’être* (reason of being) into question. It soon became apparent that this catholic spirit threatened to destroy the cult. Either Jesus must go or the religious cult must perish.

The Non-Biblicist Spirit of Jesus

The cult which Jesus confronted had a religion that was strictly controlled by the Torah or Holy Scripture. In its totality the “Torah” or the “Law” is simply Jewish Scripture, and in the New Testament the terms *Law* and *Scripture* are often used interchangeably (see John 10:34, 35; 15:25; Gal. 3:21, 22; 4:21, 22, 30).

It is sometimes suggested that Judaism’s problem was not its Biblicism but its oral

tradition which supplanted Scripture. However, the Sadducees rejected oral tradition but were no less the enemies of Jesus. And the Pharisees simply used commentaries to help them, as we do, not only to interpret the ancient text of Scripture but to apply it in all kinds of contemporary situations. Judaism's aim hardly differed from the aim of classical Protestantism—to have a religion strictly controlled by Scripture.

The Scripture was authoritative for Jesus, but not in the way it was authoritative for the cult. It is clear that Jesus did not regard Scripture as *supremely* authoritative as Judaism did. He often went beyond Scripture. He disregarded those stipulations of the Law which were not appropriate to his mission— e.g., food and Sabbath regulations. In his Sermon on the Mount he not only radicalized some Old Testament laws but discarded some as inappropriate for the new age of “kingdom ethics.” He did not place himself under the text as a mere exegete but asserted his own authority as supreme.

Jesus did not come as the mere servant of Scripture. He made it plain that the Scripture existed to serve him. His new teaching and the new thing which God was now doing through him went beyond anything found in Scripture. These things he taught and did on his own authority (i.e., “I say unto you...” rather than “The Bible says...”). But Jesus could reach back into Scripture and use its imagery and history to illustrate his gospel of God's reign.

Jesus generally did not take his point of departure from a text of Scripture but from stories, legends and ordinary secular life. In this respect his teaching was not couched in religious jargon.

It is astonishing how Jesus quoted Scripture in such a free and easy manner. Sometimes he referred to incidents from Scripture to illustrate a point but did not bother to cite the historical detail accurately (cf. Matt. 23:35 with 2 Chron. 24:20, 21; Mark 2:25, 26 with 1 Sam. 21:1-6). At other times he lifted Old Testament texts out of context and their intended meaning to serve a point in an argument (cf. John 10:34 with Ps. 82:1, 6, 7).

Perhaps most surprisingly, there is no evidence that Jesus directed his followers to Holy Scripture except to see it as a witness to himself. There is no instruction on living strictly by the Bible. There is no evidence that he commissioned the writing of the New Testament nor that he instructed his apostles to commit his memory to writing. (The Gospels were not written until half a century later, and even these were not eye-witness accounts.) In his last discourse before his death (John 13-16), Jesus did not direct his disciples to Scripture but to the coming of his Spirit.

When we read the letters of John or Paul, it is astonishing how they also neglect to urge Christians to live strictly by Scripture. In fact, it was the Judaizers who urged the

Galatians to live according to the stipulations of Holy Scripture. Paul was horrified. In his vehement response he used the words *Law* and *Scripture* interchangeably— as any first-century Jew would (see Gal. 3:21-25; 4:21-30). As the Law shuts men in prison (Gal. 3:23), so does Scripture (Gal. 3:22). 4 Whoever wants a written-code religion puts himself back in prison. “But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law [Scripture]” (Gal. 5:18). In the same way, we may read great passages such as Romans 7 and substitute the word *Scripture* where Paul uses the word *Law*.

Paul could appeal to the authority of Scripture, but not in the same way as the Judaizers, who wanted to use it as a code of conduct. Paul took his cue from Jesus and used Scripture as an authoritative witness to Christ and his gospel. But then he used Scripture with breathtaking freedom and interpreted everything in light of and in the service of the gospel.

Christian tradition made a new Torah out of the New Testament. It then tried to bind the Spirit to a nomistic use of Scripture. Yet this is contrary to the spirit of Jesus and is a return to the principle of Judaism.

By its very nature the cult— whether Jewish or Christian— must invest some document with supreme and infallible authority. Yet neither Jews nor Christians have been able to perform everything in their infallible books, because they contain so much diversity that doing everything is impossible. By interpretive devices the faithful are able to ignore all kinds of biblical instructions while insisting on others. No one obtains his belief system or his ethics directly from the Bible, uninfluenced by his culture and traditions. When we contend for the infallibility of the Bible, therefore, we are merely contending for the infallibility of our religious traditions. Roman Catholicism openly acknowledges this; while classical Protestantism continues to deceive itself that it lives by the authority of the Bible alone. Yet we cannot even agree on which books ought to be included in the New Testament canon by using the Bible alone!

The spirit of Jesus threatened the existence of the cult founded on Biblicism. He broke biblical stipulations and asserted that there was an authority above the letter of Holy Scripture. If the cult was to survive, Jesus must be destroyed. Biblicism gave the cult the mandate to do this. “We have a law, and according to that law he must die” (John 19:7).

The Ethical Spirit of Jesus

Like all religious institutions, the Jewish cult was legally constituted and membership was legally defined. Survival of the cult depended on those within the cult living strictly by the rules of the cult. Sin was legally defined as transgression of the written code. Here was an ethic centered on law.

Whenever sin is legally defined, it inevitably becomes trivialized. Ethics become grossly distorted. In the cult the worst sins are those which transgress the cultic taboos, because such sins threaten the very existence of the cult. People may be hurt, oppressed, neglected or deprived of compassion, but if this is the result of serving the cult, there is no sin “if God has been put first.” It is better that people should perish than that the sacred cult perish.

The ethical spirit of Jesus challenged the cult and threatened its existence. His ethic was not based on the cultic code but on the actual needs of people. He bent the rules or broke the rules as the occasion demanded.

Jesus lampooned the cult’s trivialization of sin. Unlike his opponents, he seldom used the word *sin*. But he told stories to unmask the real evils which alienated people from God and from one another. He turned all ethical values upside down.

In the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector, Jesus showed that the elitism and judgmental attitude of the pious were far more damnable than the scandalous law-breaking of the tax collectors (Luke 18:9-14). The elder brother who always obeyed the rules was much harder to reconcile to God than the son who lived with harlots and ate with pigs (Luke 15:11-32). In the story of the two debtors, Jesus showed that the spirit which alienated the Jews from sympathy with others was the spirit which alienated them from God (Matt. 18:21-35). The Samaritan who lived wholly outside the cult showed compassion on the man in the ditch. This Samaritan was much better than those who put “Gods service” in the cult before human need (Luke 10:25-37).

According to Jesus the spirit of the cult makes people act like the elder brother (Luke 15:25-31), the unforgiving servant (Matt. 18:28-34), the grumbling laborers (Matt. 20:1-16) and the Pharisee who thanked God that he was better than others (Luke 18:11). The righteousness of the cult (Matt. 5:20) is that which makes people elitist and judgmental of others. The kind of righteousness which the cult applauds is hypocrisy. Teachers of the cult said Jesus, put heavy burdens on people. They are in the business of controlling and running people’s lives, and when they “disciple” a person to the cult, the person’s alienation from God is doubly worse than before. Jesus detaches the person from his enslavement to the cult, makes him open and available to his neighbor, and makes love possible.

The same trivialization of sin and ethical distortions take place in the Christian cult. As soon as religion is institutionalized, members are legally defined as those who obey the rules of the cult. The worst sin becomes the one which breaks the distinctive taboos of the cult, for this threatens its existence. Let a Lutheran defect from the Lutheran view of the Supper, let a Campbellite question his cult’s doctrine of baptism,

or let the Adventist start eating ham, and what does he become in the judgment of his cult? Is not his sin regarded as far worse than a failure to be merciful, compassionate and forgiving? Is it not regarded as far worse than any sin against charity?

Even the great Luther said that a sin against love was nothing compared to a sin against faith (generally interpreted as Lutheran dogma). Thus, he often railed against other Christians in the most abusive language when they defected from his view of the Supper, baptism or other doctrine. His contempt for Jews and Muslims was expressed in language so abusive that it is unsafe to print.

Wesley lived at a time when the new industrial revolution was exploiting children and oppressing the poor. Yet he was more concerned over the blasphemous use of God's name than over the blasphemous use of God's creatures.

In the religious cult those who preach most vehemently against sin often do the most to trivialize it. They are like the mad prophet of the airwaves featured in the movie, *Network*. In this story Howard Beale as the mad prophet ranted and raved in the most superficial way against the national evils. He attracted hordes of converts who, of course, were just as mad as he was. But in this comic tragedy the one who raved against evil and the ones who cheered him on had absolutely no insight into what evil was or where it was.

In current religious television broadcasts the "mad prophet of the airwaves" is reenacted again and again. With flamboyant sallies against sin, the cheering faithful are urged to practice the morality of respectable middle-class Americana. But a far more insightful and devastating portrayal of evil often comes from the movie industry in such shows as *Network*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* or *Breaker Morant*. Does Hollywood produce better exposés of evil than does the Christian pulpit?

In Jesus there was a spirit which exposed the morality of the cult. Far from being a bulwark against sin, the spirit of the cult was exposed as the bastion of sin. Jesus showed that the spirit which alienates a person from the human race is the evil which keeps the person alienated from God. This spirit of alienation from others— this elitist, arrogant, judgmental, unforgiving, uncompassionate, separatist spirit which shuts us away from solidarity with the neighbor— is embodied and institutionalized in the cult. The spirit of the cult is not just another manifestation of evil. It is the heart of all that makes man so unlike his heavenly Father. The law-centered ethic of the cult and the person-centered ethic of Jesus were incompatible. On both sides it was war to the death.

The Great Detour of Christian History

The spirit of Jesus— his catholicity, his non-Biblicism and his people-centered ethic— was seen as the gravest possible threat to the existence of the cult. And so it was. Jesus was no mere reformer calling for a purified Judaism. He had new wine which the old wineskins of the cult could not contain. The guardians of the cult saw that the threat of Jesus was far worse than Herod or the Romans. Either he must die or the entire religious cult must perish.

There were sound legal grounds for the death of Jesus. He broke the Law. The Law places a curse on all who fail to do everything in the written code (Gal. 3:10). According to the Law he ought to die (John 19:7). So Jesus was numbered with the transgressors (Isa. 53:12). As far as the Law was concerned, he was no different from thieves, murderers, adulterers and all other sinners.

So the cult, armed with the Law, put Jesus to death. (And has not history repeatedly showed us that the greatest evil is committed when good men, for the sake of their high, unbending principles, blindly carry out the law?) This was the end— not the end of Jesus but the end of the cult and the end of the Law. He “destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations” (Eph. 2:14, 15).

The resurrection is testimony that death did not destroy this spirit of Jesus. Death and resurrection only changed the mode of his being present. They made his Spirit more effectively available to all humanity without distinction. For this Holy Spirit is the resurrected One (1 Cor. 15:45; 2 Cor., 3:14, 18)— not merely his attitude or his characteristics, not even another Divine Individual to take his place, but the very life and presence of the resurrected One (John 14:18-21; 16:16).

Now come the vital questions: Did Jesus destroy the power of the old cult at such a cost that he might establish a new cult in its place? Was it the aim and intent of Jesus to form an institutionalized Christian church with a legally-constituted membership?

It is clear that the early Christians established an organized Christian cult to replace the Jewish cult. It is also clear that some of the New Testament documents— especially later documents such as Titus, Timothy and 2 Peter— sanction the institutionalization of the Christian religion. If these documents are inerrant and infallibly represent the intent of Jesus, there is nothing further to say. In this event the best we can hope for are reformers like Luther and Calvin who will reform the cult and replace one form of repression with another. But if we can accept that the spirit of Jesus is greater than the earthen vessels which contain the witness to him, we are then free to bring even their witness under the judgment of his gospel.

Catholic scholar, Ben F. Meyer, in his challenging book, *The Aims of Jesus*, reaches the conclusion that Jesus did not intend to establish an organized, closed, sectarian community. Not only did Jesus give no hint of this, but the entire idea fails to harmonize with his spirit. 5 Protestant scholar, Hans Conzelmann, says flatly:

Jesus does not separate this people from the rest of the world by establishing an organization. If he had intended to make the separation of the elect from the world visible organizationally, then he would not have burst asunder the framework of the Jewish sects. 6

Such conclusions appear to represent a growing consensus among thoughtful scholars from all branches of the Christian movement.

It seems clear that the primitive Jerusalem community, led by James, John and Peter, retreated to a cultic conservatism that failed to reflect the catholicity and the Law-free spirit of Jesus. It took the Hellenists, fired by the cult-free spirit of Stephen, to shatter the church's cultic complacency. These Hellenists went outside the Jewish cult in spirit as well as in body and shared this Law-free, cult-free spirit of Jesus with the Gentiles. Paul then embraced the cause of Gentile freedom. He resisted the efforts of Jerusalem Christians to impose the customs of the Jewish cult on the Gentiles. Paul insisted that the gospel calls believers to live by the spirit of Jesus rather than under the rule of written laws— even laws in the Bible (Gal. 5:18). The apostle rejected the idea that he should carry written credentials from the Jerusalem church (2 Cor. 3). His idea of authority was charismatic, not organizational. As one good New Testament scholar observed, the real Paul (in contrast to the later Pauline school who wrote in his name) would not recognize a bishop if he fell over one!

The writer to the Hebrews calls Christians to leave the beloved cult and go outside the camp, where Jesus has gone (Heb. 13:13). The people of God are not called to organize another cult but to be the waiting pilgrim people who live in makeshift tents of faith with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Heb. 11:8-12; 13:14). Thus, the wandering patriarchs, rather than Israel organized under the Law of Moses, are upheld as the model for the people of the new covenant.

Did the early Christians, especially the leaders, lose their nerve when the physical return of Jesus did not occur? Did fear of sin and disorder override faith in the spirit of Jesus and make them retreat to the rule of law? Were they like the children of Israel camped at Mount Sinai, who, feeling orphaned by Moses' long stay on the mount, decided to set off for Canaan with means copied from the Egyptians? As the years wore on and Jesus did not appear in kingly glory, did Christians find security in building a new cult which increasingly resembled the one they had left? We believe the answer to these questions is Yes!

Institutions are based on the genius of written documents and the rule of law. This was true of post-patriarchal Israel. They did not understand that their written code was a concession to their hardness of heart (Matt. 19:8; Gal. 3:19-25). This is also true of the Christian church. We need look no further for the reason why the Christian church became an instrument of coercion and repression. True, it carried a gospel which promised liberty and a new spirit of brotherhood. But it succeeded in imprisoning people with a new form of social control. Intolerance, persecution and dull-gray asceticism were not the exception but the rule throughout most of Christian history.

As for professional clergymen, Luther said that the priests and monks of the Roman Church were like fleas on the Almighty's fur coat. If that be so, then Luther established a new breed of Protestant fleas.

As in the political sphere, so in the religious: today's liberators become tomorrow's oppressors. Every exodus from an established religious cult seems to be followed by the formation of another. People flee from one form of fundamentalism only to be imprisoned by another. When Thomas Jefferson uttered his famous words, "I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man," he included the Christian religion.

The spirit of Jesus is as antithetical to the Christian cult as it was to the Jewish cult. As Conzelmann says in one brilliant sentence, "The message [of Jesus] detaches the individual from the group which provides security (Israel) and opens him to his neighbor by making love possible." 7

This is the heart of the matter. The cult sets up its religious barriers like some impregnable iron curtain which so effectively isolates its people from the human race that love for the neighbor is impossible. But the incarnation shows us that God has joined the human race in and through Jesus. How can we say that this Great Spirit who ignored all religious distinctions and fellowshiped with sinners later called his followers to congregate in a closed sect where they could practice their asceticism or, much worse, cultivate a spirit of religious elitism?

He who gave his Son to the whole human race sends the Spirit of his Son into our hearts so that we also might give ourselves to the whole human race. We meet those who say, "But you must belong"—and by this they mean that we should belong to some Christian cult. But the trouble with the cult is that it will not allow a person to belong to the human race!

We therefore do not believe that the spirit of Jesus works to bring all men into the Christian ghetto. But we do believe that the spirit of Jesus calls his people to leave the security of the ghetto and go out into the world in the spirit of those first Hellenist

missionaries. The world needs to be leavened with that spirit of Jesus which will ignore and will transcend all religious, racial and cultural barriers, which will put no difference between Jew and Gentile, Christian and Muslim, black and white, male and female, American and Russian. That people are people of any kind means that based on the gospel, they are entitled to be embraced in the spirit of fellowship, forgiveness and reconciliation. We can go out and share this spirit of Jesus without trying to ram religion down people's throats. Religion will not save them anyhow, but the spirit of Jesus gives life to the dead. People may sometimes recognize his spirit and in their own way show that they really believe on him even though they may not have yet heard the story of him who died and rose again. Many who give evidence of faith in the unknown Christ will yet rise in judgment upon those who heard his name but were strangers to his spirit.

As this world teeters on the brink of self-annihilation because of religious and racial barriers and the fanatical spirit of fundamentalism, let us have hope that the world can be leavened with the spirit of him who reconciles rather than alienates, who builds bridges rather than barriers.

Notes and References

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

1. James Row, "I Would Be Like Jesus."
2. James Barr, *Beyond Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), p. 64.
3. Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology I: The Proclamation of Jesus* (New York: Scribner's, 1971), p. 115, quoted in Michael L. Cook, *The Jesus of Faith: A Study in Christology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), p. 59.
4. Paul uses verbs from the Greek word *sugkleio*, which means to enclose or shut up in prison.
5. See Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1979), pp. 196, 214-15, 219-20, 240.
6. Hans Conzelmann, *Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), p. 80.
7. Ibid. p. 51.

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