

REVIEWS

Knowing the Real Jesus

The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels, by Luke Timothy Johnson. New York: HarperCollins, 1996.

In *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*, Luke Timothy Johnson, a former Benedictine monk and the current Robert W. Woodruff Professor of New Testament and Christian Origins at the Candler School of Theology, Emory University, provides a laudable critique of the current historical Jesus enterprise known as the Jesus Seminar. With scholarship, erudition, and devotion to the Christian faith, the book unmasks the Jesus Seminar as relying mostly upon sensationalism, circular arguments, and unwarranted assumptions. It also affirms the verity of the Christian faith by pointing out the limitations of history as a means of validating faith and by stressing the meaning behind Jesus as presented in the Bible. Moreover, it offers a fresh glimpse into the real Jesus not merely as a historical figure of the past but also as the resurrected Lord of the present, who as the life-giving Spirit lives among His disciples to make them the new creation. Overall, this work is commendable for its research, analysis, and insight. Although *The Real Jesus* provides a useful defense of the faith, the greatest shortcoming in its defense is in the failure to present a vital, living faith, one that extends beyond the traditional view of the Christian life as one filled with good works. This failure, in turn, largely rests upon an incomplete view of the organic implications of the resurrection of Christ.

In the preface Johnson states that the goal of his book is to “blow the whistle on a form of scholarship I consider misguided and misleading” (vii). Motivated by the commotion in the media that the self-promoting Jesus Seminar has created, the book exposes their “ersatz scholarship” (xi). In chapter one the Jesus Seminar is characterized as an instance of “media manipulation” rather than one of “serious scholarship” (1). The Jesus Seminar is described as a “self-selected” association of approximately two hundred academics who periodically meet to discuss their reconstructions of the historical Jesus (1). *The Real Jesus* deflates their claim of being a fair representation of the “consensus view” of critical New Testament scholarship by pointing out that two hundred is a small number when placed against the several thousand New Testament scholars with substantial academic training who have taken no part in

the Seminar (2). The book argues that the Seminar has garnered so much attention from the media because of its “deliberately provocative style” illustrated by semiannual “road show” appearances across the country and by voting with colored beads about the probability of the authenticity of particular sayings in the Gospels (4, 5). The book then contends that the agenda of the Seminar is not “disinterested scholarship” seeking to produce a sober historiography but a “social mission” that ultimately aims to demolish the centuries-long tradition of the church’s adherence to the Bible (6).

Chapter two discusses several members of the Seminar including “acknowledged amateurs” such as Bishop John Spong, A. N. Wilson, and Stephen Mitchell (32), as well as “genuine academicians” such as Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, and Burton Mack (39). The reviews of each are brief, yet cogent. The critique points to a general lack of substantive evidence, careless leaps of logic from the descriptive to the normative, and criteria based on dubious assumptions. In short, “much is asserted, little demonstrated” (42). After reviewing the various claims made by these authors, consistent traits that undermine their arguments are identified. These include a rejection of the Gospels as reliable sources of our knowledge of Jesus, the portrayal of Jesus and Christian origins without reference to other canonical sources, and the speculative depiction of the mission of Jesus and His followers in terms of a social or cultural critique rather than spiritual realities.

Chapters three and four rebut the premise posited by the Jesus Seminar that a historically reconstructed Jesus is closer to the real Jesus. To disabuse the reader of the notion that faith depends on history, the book defines history and points to its limitations. While acknowledging the value of history as a noble endeavor to make sense of past human events, the book characterizes history as “a limited mode of knowledge, dependent on the frailties of the records of memory and the proclivities of self-interest” (85). In other words, history does not belong to the realm of certitude but only to that of probability. Therefore, the book argues that “history—even the best and most critical history—is not the necessary basis of religious faith” (86). In expanding on this point, three limitations that historians of Christian origins face are listed: the dearth of evidence from outside observers, the religious character of the New Testament, and a general insufficiency of geographical and chronological controls

(87-89). Since the recent “historical Jesus” books tend to ignore these intrinsic limitations, *The Real Jesus* declares that works, which purport to replace the “internal myth” of Christian origins “can be considered, in their own way, just as ‘mythic’ as the one they seek to supplant” (103).

Chapter five presents a valuable portrayal of Jesus, mainly using canonical writings and other accounts such as Josephus’s *Antiquities of the Jews*, the Babylonian Talmud, Pliny the Younger’s letter, and Tacitus’s *Annals*. While weaving an account of Jesus from such sources, the book raises one of its chief complaints against the works of the Jesus Seminar: the wholesale rejection of Paul’s Epistles, particularly the need to divorce Jesus, a “simple preacher,” from Paul, “the ‘genius’ who invented Christianity” (118). Most remarkable, however, is how the book treats the resurrection of Jesus from a vantage point of a historian. It states that the basis of Christian faith is “religious claims concerning the present power of Jesus” (133) and then depicts the Christian claim regarding the resurrection with striking insight and lucidity:

The Christian claim concerning the resurrection of Jesus is not that he picked up his old manner of life, but rather that after his death he entered into an entirely new form of existence, one in which he shared the power of God and in which he could share that power with others. The resurrection experience, then, is not simply something that happened to Jesus but is equally something that happened to Jesus’ followers. The sharing in Jesus’ new life through the power of the Holy Spirit is an essential dimension of the resurrection. This power of new life, furthermore, is understood by Christians to be the basis for claiming that they are part of a new creation, and a new form of humanity shaped according to the image of the resurrected One. Paul draws the contrast best: “for as by a man came death, by a man also has come resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive...the first man, Adam, became a living being; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit (1 Cor. 15:21-22, 45). (134-135)

Since the resurrection elevates Jesus beyond the merely human into the divine plane, the resurrection strictly defined as a “human event in time and space” is not “historical” (136). According to *The Real Jesus*, however, this does not negate the reality of the resurrection but only points back to the limitations of history, for history can neither prove nor disprove its historicity.

Chapter six presents a conception of the real Jesus of faith:

The literature...understands by the designation “Lord” that Jesus, a Jewish man who was executed by crucifixion under the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate...now lives in a more powerful fashion in his human life, has become

“life giving Spirit,” and continues to be experienced among his followers precisely through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. (88)

Hence, chapter six shows that “the *real Jesus* for Christian faith is not simply a figure of the past but very much and above all a figure of the present, a figure, indeed, who defines believers’ present by his presence” (142). The book proceeds to define the genuine Christian faith not as an acknowledgment of “a human construction about the past,” which is a “form of idolatry,” but as a “response to the living God, whom Christians declare is powerfully at work among them through the resurrected Jesus” (143). The book also argues that the Gospel narratives were written not so much to reconstruct a history of Jesus, but to provide meaning regarding the identity of Jesus. In brief, it states that the consistent pattern of the mission of Jesus depicted in the four canonical Gospels and duplicated in the rest of the New Testament is a “radical obedience to God and selfless love toward other people” (158). It concludes: “The ‘real Jesus’ is therefore also the one who through the Spirit replicates in the lives of believers faithful obedience to God and loving service to others” (166).

Some salutary points in this book deserve our attention. First, it pierces through the thin veneer of recent books from the Jesus Seminar, revealing their superficial and irresponsible scholarship. Second, it reveals the limitations of history, convincingly demonstrating that history is not the ultimate touchstone for the Christian faith and that historians must humbly admit their inability to verify events of the past with certainty. Of equal importance, it shows an earnest desire and conscious effort to bring the Christian audience into an intimate contact with the present Christ of faith rather than inciting the reader to romanticize the historical Jesus.

Despite such strengths, the book suffers from three main weaknesses. First, while the book highlights the great work of Christ’s resurrection, it fails to explore the rich implications of the truth that the real Jesus today is the life-giving Spirit. Inasmuch as the resurrection is the basis of Christian faith, the life-giving Spirit is the reality and the life-pulse of Christ’s resurrection. In essence, our experience of the real Jesus is dependent upon knowing Him as the life-giving Spirit. In two places, both previously cited, the book identifies the real Jesus with the life-giving Spirit. Except for these two instances, the Spirit is described more as an agent of the real Jesus rather than the real Jesus Himself in resurrection. Certain utterances suggest that the Spirit is more or less an instrument of the real Jesus. These include: “*through* the transforming power of the Holy Spirit” (88); “*through* the power of the Holy Spirit” (134); “*through* the Spirit given by this glorious Lord” (142); “*by* the Spirit of freedom given by this Lord” (142); and “the ‘real Jesus’ is the

one who is now alive and powerfully present, *through* the Holy Spirit” (144, emphasis added). Furthermore, the book speaks of the Holy Spirit as a “symbol” of the “powerful life of God” into which Jesus entered after His crucifixion and burial (134). This reduces the Holy Spirit to being little more than a token representative of the eternal life of God.

The New Testament, however, reveals that the real Jesus, the resurrected Christ, *is* now the Spirit. To know the real Jesus as the resurrected Christ is to know “the Spirit of reality” because the Spirit of reality is the real Jesus Himself in pneumatic form. Immediately after giving His disciples the promise of the indwelling Spirit, Jesus said to them, “I am coming to you....In that day you will know that *I am...in* you” (John 14:18-20, emphasis added). A distinction between knowing the Spirit as an instrument of the resurrected Christ and knowing the Spirit as the resurrected Christ Himself is not insignificant, because our experiential knowing of the real Jesus hinges upon our conception of the Spirit. The book seems to suggest that the Spirit is mainly an impersonal symbol or instrument given by Christ through which He operates *among* His believers; nowhere in this book does it speak of the pneumatic Christ actually dwelling *within* the believers. An exhortation to know the Christ of faith is commendable; it elevates Jesus out of the confines of history by portraying Him as the resurrected Christ powerfully at work among His believers. Yet if we are to know this present Christ in reality, we must know Him as the Spirit—not merely as a power among us but as the very person of the resurrected Christ living within us (2 Cor. 3:17; 13:5; Rom. 8:9-10). Because the book fails to enunciate this truth with clarity, it offers limited help to know the Christ of faith whom it so ably defends.

Second, Johnson’s presentation of what he calls “a deep consistency” detected beneath the “surface” of the whole New Testament is rather shallow (166). As previously discussed, the inherent meaning of the New Testament is encapsulated as the pattern of “obedient service and selfless love,” as seen in the life of Jesus and duplicated in His disciples (162). Moreover, it asserts that “within the New Testament, no other pattern joins the story of Jesus and that of his followers” (166). Indisputably such virtues can be seen in the life of Jesus and His followers. However, beneath the layer of these virtues lies a deeper motif of the New Testament. The singular theme that runs throughout the entire New Testament is that the Triune God desires to dispense Himself in Christ into His chosen people as their

life, life supply, and everything to produce a corporate expression of Himself as the Body of Christ (Eph. 3:8-19; 1 Tim. 1:34). The reality of the Body of Christ is a corporate living of the believers, who receive the divine dispensing to deny their natural life and to live by the divine life wrought into them for the full expression of the Triune God. In this light, the Christian life is not a grueling exercise to emulate the life of Jesus

through the outward instrumentality of the Spirit as the believers’ power; it is a daily partaking of the pneumatic Christ as the life-giving Spirit imparted into the believers, resulting in the spontaneous magnification of Christ (Phil. 1:19-21). When Christ lives in a believer, through him, and even as him, the manifold virtues of Christ, including obedience and love, will be expressed (Gal. 2:20; 4:19; 5:22). Hence, obedi-

ent service and selfless love cannot reveal the intrinsic reason for such a splendid human living, which is the divine dispensing of the Triune God. In other words, they are fruits, but not the root. Because it focuses more on outward manifestations and less on the intrinsic source of the Christian life, the book’s portrayal of Jesus and His believers cannot escape the confines of the traditional portrait of the Christian life as one characterized by the performance of good works rather than the enjoyment of the divine dispensing.

The third weakness that mitigates the book’s otherwise penetrating cultural critique of the Jesus Seminar is the bias toward Roman Catholicism that runs deep throughout the book. The Protestant Reformation—Luther, in particular—is faulted for impairing the framework of the canon, the authority of the church, and the creeds, thereby opening the way for the subsequent forms of historical critical scholarship, including the recent Jesus Seminar itself. This sweeping charge against Luther contains at least two flaws. First, it contends that Luther’s attack on Catholic traditions through his efforts to recover the original text assumed that the development of Christianity should be viewed “as a decline” (68). The book then challenges this premise by stating that “in most matters,...earlier forms are perfected by later development” (68). In so doing, the book undermines its own premise: If it is permissible to develop and perfect Christianity, why should adherents of the Jesus Seminar be challenged for their efforts to “perfect” an alternative view of Christianity? By legitimizing traditions that developed from an original form of Christianity, the book unwittingly yet implicitly supports the rationale for the Jesus Seminar. Second, the book suggests that there was a monolithic and undisputed interpretation of the Bible before the Protestant Reformation which the

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threefold cord of canon, church, and creed held together. But this is far from true. From the inception of the church, divergent views concerning the Triune God, the person and work of Christ, and many other matters have been commonplace. The wholesale charge that Luther somehow initiated a trend toward a critical examination of the faith is simply untenable.

Ultimately the book aims not only to critique the historical Jesus enterprise but also subtly to persuade the reader to return to the Catholic tradition. Instead of returning to the Catholic tradition, however, we must make a fundamental commitment to the pure Word of God, the unique source of the divine revelation. *The Real Jesus* projects an image of Jesus that is tinged by Roman Catholicism. Phrases such as “obedient faith” and “loving service” are redolent of *The Rule of Benedict* and Kempis’s *Imitation of Christ* (166). In the final paragraph of the book, Saint Francis of Assisi—the epitome of self-sacrificial service—is presented as a model that Christians should emulate.

As a whole, this book contains an excellent critique of the Jesus Seminar but an inadequate presentation of the vital essence of Christian faith. Although it succeeds in defending the Christian faith from a subservience to history, the very faith that it vindicates is colored by a bias toward Catholic theology, limited in its scope of the divine revelation, and deficient in its application to the subjective experience of the believers in Christ.

by David Yoon

The Oneness of the Common Faith

Reclaiming the Great Tradition: Evangelicals, Catholics and Orthodox in Dialogue, edited by James S. Cutsinger. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997.

The New Testament speaks of the “the common faith” (Titus 1:4) and of arriving at “the oneness of the faith” (Eph. 4:13). The common faith is the objective faith which is held by and is common to all believers in Christ. This common faith involves the God-given capacity to believe in the crucial items of the faith (2 Tim. 4:7; 1 Tim. 6:21), such as the inspiration of the Scriptures, the Triune God, the deity of Christ, His redemptive death, and His resurrection from the dead. To arrive at the oneness of the faith is to arrive at an actual oneness in our practical Christian living in and for the Body of Christ. For this faith we should earnestly contend (Jude 3), and on behalf of this faith we should fight the good fight (1 Tim. 6:12). The common faith, at the oneness of

which we need to arrive and for which we need to struggle, contend, and fight, is the objective faith which has been delivered once for all to the saints and which all must embrace in order to be genuine Christians, true children of God. *The faith*, therefore, refers to the things in which Christians believe; it denotes the object of our faith, our belief (Titus 1:4; Rev. 14:12; 2 Tim. 4:7). Because this faith differs radically from human, religious traditions, much of which pertain to items which are aspects of the church in its degradation, we need to discern between faith and tradition.

Reclaiming the Great Tradition (RGT) is an illustration of the need for a proper understanding of the contents of the common faith and of the way to arrive at the practical oneness of this faith. As indicated by the writings included in this volume, all the contributors are adherents to and possessors of the common faith. Furthermore, as those who appear ready to fight the good fight of the faith by contending for the faith delivered once for all, they seem to be joined in resisting what William J. Abraham identifies as today’s enemy—a new religion: “What we are witnessing is the emergence of a new creed, a new moral code and a new cult, that is, the invention of post-Christian religion....We can see the attack [on the faith] for what it truly is, namely, the intentional invention of a new religion” (123). Carl E. Braaten, author of the epilogue, expresses a similar concern when he indicates that we are living in “a day when theologies calling themselves Christian begin and end without handing on what we have received from the apostolic tradition as the core of the faith” (187). *The core of the faith*—that is the concern of this important volume. What is the core of the faith, and to what extent is it coterminous with what is called “the great tradition,” a tradition which allegedly stands in need of reclamation?

RGT, a collection of addresses and responses flanked by an introduction and an epilogue, is the product of an “ecumenical conference for traditional Christians”—Christians dedicated “to upholding the faith and practice of the historic church”—conducted at Aiken, South Carolina, on May 16-20, 1995 (7). The aim of the conference was “to test whether an ecumenical orthodoxy, solidly based on the classic Christian faith as expressed in the Scriptures and ecumenical councils, could become the foundation for a unified and transformative witness to the present age” (8). According to the word of James S. Cutsinger in “Introduction: Finding the Center,” the conference participants asked themselves a particular question: “Is it possible...for those who are deeply committed to differing theological perspectives to help each other in defending and communicating their common faith?” (8). *Their common faith* suggests a common body of beliefs shared by all genuine Christians; *differing theological perspectives* suggests a need to arrive at the oneness of

this common faith. This indicates, at least to this reviewer, that in *RGT* the crucial issue is to describe, if not define, “their common faith” and to move toward a practical oneness, or unity, which is based on this faith.

In his introduction Cutsinger speaks of “the very heart of our faith” (8). This “heart” is the “center” which, in the opinion of many, somehow holds the believers together despite the theological differences and outright divisions among them. This center is, in Cutsinger’s view, what C. S. Lewis called “mere Christianity,” that is, “a common body of doctrine and morals” (10). “Real unity,” Cutsinger goes on to say, is related to this center and even dependent on it. Later, Cutsinger asks, “Where should we expect to find unity? Certainly not on the surface or along the edges but at the heart. On the inside, not the outside—an inside, moreover, of a very particular kind” (12). What kind? This is the question which the six papers (plenary addresses) and responses (from group discussions) contained in this volume attempt to answer.

In responding to Peter Kreeft’s “Ecumenical Jihad,” Theodore Pulcini says that Kreeft “presents a vivid and intriguing analysis of the dynamics of moral decline that seems to be gathering momentum daily in our world” (38). Pulcini agrees that the problem is “that something is amiss in the moral order of the modern world, that we are experiencing a serious decline in individual and communal standards of behavior” (38). Kreeft’s answer to this decline is a particular kind of holy war—a war of generic religion against no religion. “The age of religious wars is ending; the age of religious war is beginning; a war of all religions against none. The first world war of religion is upon us” (23). Participation in this war, Kreeft’s paper seems to suggest, will usher in real unity. God “has now allowed Satan to let loose on the world a worldwide spiritual war, which by attacking not one religion but all religions is uniting God-loving Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans and Protestants (and even Jews and Muslims) more powerfully than anything else in history has ever done” (23). Kreeft’s thesis is provocative and his arguments are intriguing; however, his paper appears to be out of place and largely irrelevant in that it fails to address the central issue—the content of the common faith, which is the basis of the practical oneness of the believers in Christ. Once the reader of *RGT* gets past Kreeft’s call to arms, she or he can consider, with the help of the five remaining papers, the content of the common faith, which, with considerable ambiguity, this book calls “the great tradition.”

In his paper, “A New Thing: Ecumenism at the Threshold of the Third Millennium,” Richard John Neuhaus addresses “the meaning of ecumenism and accountability to tradition” (48). “In acknowledging one another as Christians,” Neuhaus informs us, “we have already taken a very major ecumenical step. That is, we understand ourselves to

be living in the same *oikoumenē*, the same world of faith” (48). Although we are members of “the world inhabited by faith” (48), serious differences remain, despite the fact that “the imperative toward unity is inherent and irrepressible in Christian existence, as it is also explicit in our Lord’s will for those who call themselves his disciples” (49). Admitting that unity is not by our choice and that ecumenism, as defined above, is not optional, Neuhaus asserts that it is “between East [Orthodoxy] and West [Catholicism] that the healing [of division] must begin” (51). In a sincere effort to promote such healing, Neuhaus urges believers “to explore ever more deeply and ever more carefully what we acknowledge in common to be the revealed truth of God in Christ” (52-53). At this juncture we must face a host of issues related to what Neuhaus calls “tradition and traditions” (55), or Tradition, which possesses unique authority, and tradition, which does not. Faith (the great Tradition) unites, but tradition divides. To insist on the latter is injurious to the unity which is predicated on the former. Neuhaus leaves us with the problem of determining what is of the common faith (that is, of the great Tradition) and what is of the traditions that abound in various Christian bodies.

The paper presented by Harold O. J. Brown—“Proclamation and Preservation: The Necessity and Temptations of Church Tradition”—focuses on the issue of tradition and deals with two significant “pair of false alternatives being presented today: the first is Scripture or tradition, the second, Scripture or church” (72). Then Brown asks a question: “How are we to rank these, in their order of priority or authority, Scripture, tradition and church?” (72). Brown’s immediate response is that it “is inappropriate and misleading to demand that we choose between Scripture and tradition, Scripture and church (or even tradition and church)” (72-73). The remainder of his paper is an attempt to avoid this inappropriate choice by suggesting how Scripture, tradition, and church should be related. In any proposed relationship, faith in Christ must be central. Arguing both that saving faith in Christ is foundational and that tradition is unavoidable, Brown proceeds to discuss the danger of tradition: “When tradition proliferates it may obscure the vital truths of the gospel. When traditions lead the naive to trust in some human idea...rather than in the atoning sacrifice of Christ, they may imperil their own salvation” (84). Brown claims that we may observe certain traditions and honor them as suitable and even necessary, but traditions must never be allowed to replace faith. “Essential to Christianity is faith; this is why the term *faith* can be used to stand not merely for the content of the message believed, as well as for the believer’s trust in God, but even for the totality of Christianity” (85).

The next two papers—“Father, Glorify Thy Name!” by Patrick Henry Reardon and “The Trinity: Heart of Our

Life” by Kallistos Ware—propound an essential organic connection between the Triune God and the faith and unity of the believers. Concerned with what is distinctive about the Christian faith, Reardon believes that there “persists among Christians today a disposition to talk of God apart from Christ,” “a tendency to describe even the true God, the God of the Christian revelation, in very general, abstract terms not rooted in the living experience of God in Christ” (101). “It seems that some Christians, having found God in Christ, feel free to separate him from this unique font of revelation and to discuss and describe him in terms that are hardly related at all to the vision of his glory manifest in the face of Christ” (101). Reardon insists, rightly, that in speaking of God we must speak of the Father and the Son. “If we Christians may no longer with a quiet conscience refer to God using the names *Father* and *Son*, are we really talking about the Christian faith?” (104). For Reardon, the answer is surely no. To be a Christian requires faith in the Triune God—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Not only do we believe in Christ—we have been incorporated into Christ. “Because of this incorporation into Christ, we are not simply *called* the children of God; we *are* the children of God....Indeed, because of this participation in the divine life, it is even more proper to call God ‘Father’ than to give this name to our own earthly fathers” (110). According to Reardon’s position presented in his paper, this incorporation into Christ and this participation in the divine life are at the very “center”—the heart of the common faith—with which *RGT* is concerned.

For Ware the Trinity is also at the heart of the common faith and thus at the center of “the great Tradition.” Ware expresses his view this way:

For traditional Christians the doctrine of the Trinity is not just a possible way of thinking about God. It is the only way. The one God of the Christian church cannot be conceived except as Trinity. Apart from the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, God cannot be known in the truth and reality of his being. The doctrine of the Trinity is not an embarrassing complication, a piece of technical theologizing of no importance for our daily existence. It stands at the very heart of our Christian life. (126)

Ware continues by pointing out that among the three of the Trinity there is not only a marvelous coinherence, or mutual indwelling, of the three persons but also an interpersonal communion in a fellowship of shared love. This interpersonal communion is the model of the believers’ oneness today. Drawing upon the Lord’s words in John 17:21 and 23, Ware remarks, “‘Even as’: it is our highest human vocation to reproduce on earth the *perichōrēsis*, the unceasing movement of shared love, that flows from all eternity among the three members of the Holy Trinity” (134). From this Ware concludes that the genuine oneness

of the believers in Christ is based not only on the common faith—correct belief concerning the Triune God—but also upon the inner being of the Triune God Himself. Union with the coinhering Triune God is both the heart of our faith and the basis of our oneness.

J. I. Packer’s paper is entitled “On from Orr: Cultural Crisis, Rational Realism and Incarnational Ontology.” Although Packer has much to say concerning James Orr (1844-1913), a distinguished Scottish theologian and apologist, what is of primary value in his paper is his view of “the great tradition” and of where he stands in relation to it. Identifying himself as “an Anglican, a Protestant, an evangelical and in C. S. Lewis’s sense a ‘mere Christian,’ that is, as it is sometimes put, a small-*c* catholic,” Packer theologizes out of what he sees as “the authentic biblical and creedal mainstream of Christian identity, the confessional and liturgical great tradition that the church on earth has characteristically maintained from the start” (155). Among his list of the items in “the great tradition of Christian faith and life,” Packer includes the following: “recognizing the canonical Scriptures as the repository and channel of Christ-centered divine revelation”; “acknowledging the triune God as sovereign in creation, providence and grace”; “focusing faith, in the sense both of belief and of trust, on Jesus Christ as God incarnate; as our crucified and living Savior, Lord, master, friend, life and hope; and as the one mediator of, and thus the only way to, a filial relationship with God his Father”; and “seeing Christians as a family of forgiven sinners, now supernaturally regenerated in Christ and empowered for godliness by the Holy Spirit” (156). These, as Packer correctly observes, are the common ground and “the nonnegotiables of Christianity according to Christ” (156-157). Among the papers in *RGT*, Packer’s is the most useful in attempting to delineate the contents of the common faith. He squarely faces the issue of what is nonnegotiable and what is not, and for this reason his contribution has particular value.

Echoing the tone sounded in the introduction, *RGT* concludes with Carl E. Braaten’s “Epilogue: Theology *Pro Ecclesia*—Evangelical, Catholic and Orthodox.” Braaten affirms Packer’s word about theologizing out of “the authentic biblical and creedal mainstream of Christian identity” (185), and he supports “a collaborative model [of theological inquiry] where theologians from across the ecumenical spectrum inquire into what the church is to believe, teach and confess on the basis of the Holy Scriptures and the ecumenical creeds” (186). He is convinced that all believers have the same starting point—God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. “Whatever adjective we use in the dogmatics we teach, whether evangelical, Catholic or Orthodox, we all intend to be faithful to what believers in Christ and members of his church believe on the basis of God’s special revelation in Jesus Christ” (186-187). In particular, Braaten is assured

of one matter: "The one thing that all Christians and all churches in all times and places claim to share is the gospel of Jesus Christ according to the Scriptures" (187). This, in Braaten's view, is "the place to concentrate in explicating the essential faith of the Christian church" (187).

RGT does not succeed in explicating this essential faith, but this volume is helpful in showing the need both for such an explication and for the proper discernment between the items of the faith, which are nonnegotiable, and the aspects of man-made tradition, which at best are optional and at worst are injurious and misleading. What is the common faith, the faith delivered once for all to the saints, the faith on behalf of which we must fight against heresy and apostasy? According to the Scriptures, what is included in the essentials of this faith, and what things are secondary? In brief, what must we believe in order to be saved and regenerated, to be children of God and members of the Body of Christ? Surely it is crucial for us to understand these things. What does it mean to arrive at the oneness of the faith? When and how will we arrive at such a practical oneness in life? These are pressing questions, for they touch matters which are intrinsically related to God's heart's desire to have a corporate expression of Himself in Christ. *RGT* is helpful in raising the issues concerning the common faith and the oneness of the faith.

However, *RGT* is of little help in resolving these issues. *RGT* hinders even as it helps. This claim, obviously a personal judgment and evaluation, is based upon two weaknesses that are woven into the fabric of this volume. First, the term *historic church* is used as if its meaning were self-evident and universally accepted. What really is this *historic church*? Does *historic* mean "classical" or "traditional"? Is it a synonym for "orthodox"? One may justly take *historic* to describe the church in its historical development, including its corruption and degradation, as opposed to its biblical reality and practicality. If we take as our criterion historical development instead of biblical revelation, we may regard as parts of "the great Tradition" certain negative elements ("leaven") which are actually incompatible with or even contrary to the divine revelation concerning the common faith and the oneness of the faith.

A second weakness is the failure, evident in *RGT*, to distinguish clearly between the common faith and religious tradition and to recognize adequately the dangers of tradition. According to the Scriptures, tradition may be

employed to nullify the word of God, and thus its acceptance cannot be a requirement for a believer's being received into the household of faith. Furthermore, our oneness is the oneness of the faith, not the oneness of tradition. Insistence upon a oneness based on tradition, the practice of much of the "historic church," issues in division. Nevertheless, at least two *RGT* participants, both representatives of Orthodoxy, exhibit such an insistence. In his response to Brown's paper, Father Andrew remarks:

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received into the household of faith.
Insistence upon a oneness based on
tradition, the practice of much of the
"historic church," issues in division.*

In this regard let us make note of the fact that the Orthodox Church does not consider any authentic part of Tradition to be merely human tradition....The Orthodox Church...regards all aspects of holy Tradition as Spirit-inspired.... In the Orthodox view Tradition does not add to the message—Tradition is the message. (91)

For Bradley Nassif, the criterion of unity is total acceptance of Orthodoxy:

The unique contribution of Orthodoxy to discussions on unity has been its claim to be the one visible and complete body of Christ...This Orthodox witness...is nothing more and nothing less than the apostolic faith of the New Testament handed down and received by the faithful through the ages....The most self-consistent way to interpret this claim is to affirm that within the various structures of the Orthodox Church, and above all in its sacramental life, God's saving revelation of himself is present without distortion or deviation. (177-178)

For these contributors, the requirement is unequivocally clear: Accept the Orthodox Church, with all its supposed "Spirit-inspired" traditions, as "the one visible and complete body of Christ." This may be "the great Tradition" in the minds of some, but it is not the common faith revealed in the Word of God and it cannot enable the believers in Christ to arrive at the oneness of the faith for the building up of the Body of Christ. The claims of the Orthodox Church and all its traditions need to be examined in the light of the Scriptures, the written word of God.

Readers of *RGT* may benefit from reading another book, which is faithful to the Scriptures and which enables us to determine what is truly nonnegotiable and thereby to arrive at the oneness of the faith. This book, written out of burden for the building up of the organic Body of Christ for the fulfillment of God's eternal purpose, is *The Speciality, Generality, and Practicality of the Church Life* by Witness Lee.

by Ron Kangas with Paul Onica