
RENEWAL



The Journal of the Evangelical Renewal Fellowship in New England

Co-Editors: Deborah Botham, Walter Ciesluk

March/April/May 2006

Evangelical Renewal Fellowship is the New England Association of The Confessing Movement within the United Methodist Church

JESUS, THE FOLK HERO **Rev. Dr. Thomas W. Bentum**

A few years ago a retired professional woman made an appointment with me to talk about joining the church. She had been coming to the worship service for a couple of months and now she was thinking about joining. She had grown up in The United Methodist Church but had not been attending for quite some time. Now that she was retired she wanted to make some changes in her life and coming back to church was one of them. As we talked she made it known that she was curious about something. She wanted to know why I talked so much about Jesus. She told me that growing up she heard a lot about God in her church, but not a lot about Jesus. She found it a little troubling that I was directing worship toward him and not God. She wanted to know if The United Methodist Church had changed its beliefs since she was gone.

I will leave the rest of the story until the end because the important thing is not my answer but her question. How sad it is that during this woman's formative years in the church she heard little about Jesus. Not only that, but what she did hear was not very compelling and was obviously unbiblical. How many more of our former or current members have had this same experience? Evidently a great majority, if the hard data of our church's low commitment to discipleship and our continued loss of membership are indicators.

I would like to say that our greatest task as Evangelicals is to stand up against the progressive (their term, not mine) theologies rampant in our denomination. I am prepared for that. I went to seminary, I am well read and I have faced successfully many articulate arguments that distort the orthodox teachings of the church. I am prepared to take on the disciples of these progressive theologies sitting in the pews. However, I can't find many of those disciples in the pews. What I find are folks, like the woman above, who have been basically left uninformed and confused. The years of progressive preachers and curriculum in our denomination has not created very many hardened lay progressives, but a vast sea of biblical ignorance.

One District Superintendent said to me that because I was a conservative she could place me in almost any church in New England and I would do well because our churches are essentially conservative. She is right; the churches are indeed theologically conservative in nature, but not conservative in historic, orthodox, Christian teachings. The vacuum left from years of confusing, progressive theology has left churches filled with conservative believers in what Dr. George Hunter, III calls American folk religion.

As I said, I am prepared to do battle with many distortions of the biblical witness, but American folk religion is a tough adversary. Here are a few of the things that I believe characterizes American folk religion in New England: God is a nice, grandfatherly guy who loves everyone and helps out once in awhile when we can't do things ourselves as long as we at least try (God helps those who help themselves). In the end everything is going to be okay. The Bible is a handbook that gives some advice for living and has some nice stuff to make you feel good too (ignore the negative stuff, that was probably not part of the original anyway). Jesus is the folk hero who figures out how to do things right and is an example for us all (if we just try harder we can be just like him).

I do not want to discount the need to proclaim the Jesus of the Bible in the face of the many distortions used by our leadership in the denomination or religious groups outside the church. We need to understand what is being taught and preached by our progressive leaders because they are the ones shaping how the church operates and are the gatekeepers for future leaders. However, it is Jesus the folk hero that we face on a day-to-day basis. Because he is not the authentic Jesus of the Scriptures, he has lost his power in the transformation in people's lives and our congregations. Jesus the folk hero is a high ideal impossible to attain and our people have either given up trying and are crushed by guilt or have staked out a self-righteous corner for themselves.

We need to put at the center of our teaching and preaching the authentic Jesus. When people discover who he really is, the belief in American folk religion crumbles and the door is open to a life giving relationship that transforms. As I read the Gospels I see that many in Jesus' day rejected him and a few gave up everything to become world changers. That is what happens when the authentic Jesus is encountered. We need to proclaim the authentic Jesus in our day knowing that many may reject him and probably us along with him. But in the crowd are some who are ready to hear and respond to the authentic Jesus and take up the cross and follow him. Are we ready to follow Jesus' model of raising up disciples knowing the cost may be high?

The alternative is to leave Jesus the folk hero alone and continue church as usual. It is the safe way and I am sure we will make no enemies. No "spiritual elite" will emerge disturbing the peace and the way we have always believed will remain intact. However, that, as Bishop Weaver calls it, is simply managing decline. Worse, we are misrepresenting Jesus to the people around us.

To finish the story I started, I told the woman that what I meant was that Jesus is what we are primarily about as Christians and United Methodists. We then had a good discussion about who Jesus really is. Sadly, after a few months she left the church because she could not accept what she was hearing. Not a marvelous success story on my part, but I felt like I had at least given her a genuine chance to make her own decision. Giving people a chance to decide is what we are called to do. That only happens as the authentic Jesus is proclaimed and taught clearly in our day, even at the risk that some may reject him. We need to recommit ourselves to this vital task if we are ever to see renewal take place in our church.

COVERING OUR MEETINGS WITH PRAYER

One of the goals of the ERF Prayer Team is to cover each District's pre-conference briefing with prayer. We have volunteers for Northern Maine and New Hampshire. Can you help us out in your district?

Please contact Robbin Grill at randagrill@hotmail.com or robbin@rrgcpa.com.



THE REALITY OF THE RESURRECTION

Carl E. Braaten

The ecumenical movement has not yet reached its goal; Christianity is still badly divided. However, the deepest divisions are no longer denominational, say, between Catholics and Protestants, Lutherans and Reformed, Evangelical and mainline churches. The deepest fault line appears where faith and unbelief meet within the churches, among their theologians, bishops, and pastors. Nowhere is this more evident than in the matter of the resurrection of Jesus.

Prior to the Enlightenment, Christian theologians were not vexed by the question, “Did the resurrection of Jesus really happen?” What Paul said placed the question beyond dispute: “If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain...” (1 Corinthians 15:14, NRSV). For many post-Enlightenment Christians, Paul’s words no longer seem to settle the matter.

For example, A.J.M. Wedderburn, New Testament professor at the University of Munich, concludes that Paul’s argument is thoroughly flawed. In his book *Beyond Resurrection*, he writes: “Paul’s logic simply cannot hold water today. His rhetoric has led him astray.” The title of his book is also its thesis: The results of modern historical criticism have placed the resurrection of Jesus beyond our capacity to believe that it really happened.

Take another example. Robert W. Funk tells about how he once formulated the proposition that the resurrection was an event in the life of Jesus, then presented it to members of the Jesus Seminary. In his book *Honest to Jesus*, he writes: “My proposition was received with hilarity by several Fellows. One suggested that it was an oxymoron...Others alleged that the formulation was meaningless, since we all assume, they said, that Jesus’ life ended with his crucifixion and death. I was surprised by this response. I shouldn’t have been. After all, John Dominic Crossan has confessed ‘I do not think that anyone, anywhere, at any time brings dead people back to life.’ That’s fairly blunt. But it squares with what we really know, as distinguished from what many want to believe. Sheehan is even blunter: ‘Jesus, regardless of where his corpse ended up, is dead and remains dead.’”

Some years ago I wrote an editorial for *Pro Ecclesia* entitled “Can We Still Be Christians?” (Fall, 1995, 395-97). It was prompted by Gerd Luedemann’s book, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, in which, like Wedderburn, he reconstructs Christian belief apart from the resurrection. That question, “Can we still be Christians?” was originally asked by David Friedrich Strauss after he had dissolved the entire life of the historical Jesus, from the incarnation to the resurrection, into a Christ-myth. Strauss’s answer was simply and honestly a brazen “No.” Luedemann’s answer, exactly opposite, was an emphatic “Yes.” We modern Christians, unlike the deluded Christians of earlier times, may not be able to believe that the resurrection is an event that really happened to Jesus, but we can still believe all that is truly essential—Jesus’ exemplary life and moral teachings. The resurrection adds nothing that was not already present in the historical Jesus, such as forgiveness of sins, affirmation of life, and experience of eternity here and now. The conclusion of my editorial was that Strauss was right, and Luedemann wrong. Without the confession that God raised Jesus from the dead on the third day, Christianity has mutated into a different religion.

Meanwhile, I have learned that Gerd Luedemann has reconsidered his answer; he has renounced the Christian faith. There is something tragically clarifying about that decision, one that the likes of Bishop John Spong, Marcus Borg, and a host of others lack the insight or courage to make. The motto of the Enlightenment was “sapere aude!”—have courage to use your own reason. Luedemann apparently has finally acquired the courage, like Strauss, to reason that there’s no point in calling yourself a Christian if you don’t believe that God raised Jesus from the dead. The Christian faith stands or falls with the reality of the resurrection, and it’s time theologians took the courage to say it to their colleagues who pretend otherwise.

The resurrection and the identity of God

For Christians, the question of the identity of God was given a definitive answer in the event of Jesus’ resurrection. Faith in God is not separable from the belief that God raised the crucified Jesus from the dead. We cannot expect other religions to stake their claim to the knowledge of God on the resurrection of Jesus, but we do expect that every theology that merits the name Christian will do so. How is it then that process theology, the one school of thought that boasts of the distinction of being “made in America” (all the others being somehow imports from Europe), produces

comes about a God who looks so different from the one “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Romans 4:17).

In dismissing the resurrection, Schubert Ogden, one of the majordomos of process theology, confesses that the resurrection of Jesus “would be just as relevant to my salvation as an existing self or person as that the carpenter next door just drove a nail into a two-by-four, or that American technicians have at last been successful in recovering a nose cone that had first been placed in orbit around the earth.” Considering that Ogden had a long career as a seminary teacher of future United Methodist pastors, can you imagine the joy the gospel according to his theology would bring the faithful on Easter Sunday? This explains why so many of us have had a difficult time seeing the resemblance between the God of American process thought and the God of the classical Christian tradition.

Christians believe in God because he raised Jesus from the dead, and they believe in Jesus for the same reason. When Paul spoke to the Athenian philosophers in front of the Areopagus, he did not adjust his telling of the good news about Jesus and the resurrection to fit their metaphysical beliefs. He told them what sounded like babbling nonsense: God will judge the world by Jesus of Nazareth, and this he guaranteed by raising him from the dead. Some scoffed, some believed. Same old story then as now, but with this difference: now the scoffers—many of them—are to be found inside the churches, among them ministers, seminary professors, and parish pastors.

If Jesus had not been raised, he might have been vaguely remembered as an unsuccessful leader of a tiny Palestinian sect. At best he would be recognized as a teacher of religion and ethics, like Socrates or Gautama, but not as the Savior. If Jesus had not been raised, his special claim to divine authority to forgive sins would have been discredited by his crucifixion. A new event was needed to confirm Jesus’ claim to stand in for God, to do the things that only God can do. Jesus had spoken and acted as though he were on the inside of God’s will for the world. His encroachment on the authority of God, as the Jewish leaders felt so keenly, was blasphemy unless his claim was to be legitimated.

The resurrection was an act by which God identified himself with the cause of Jesus, vindicating Jesus’ claim to represent the kingdom of heaven in his earthly ministry. At the same time, the resurrection was an act of God by which the cause of Jesus could be continued in history and not terminated by humiliation on a criminal’s cross. Thus the resurrection is the pivotal point in the story we love to tell about Jesus and his love.

What really happened on Easter morning?

Can we know what really happened on the morning of Easter? There were no witnesses to the event itself. We have stories of the empty tomb, and we have witnesses to the risen Christ. Do they tell us what kind of event the resurrection was? So far we have only said that we must speak of the resurrection of Jesus as an act of God. Our knowledge of God and the resurrection of Jesus come from the same source, from the Scriptures and the church. We cannot explain the resurrection by using the reductive categories of historical positivism or humanistic psychology, and we see no point in the attempts of the Jesus Seminar to do so. Such procedures only bring people to the unbelief with which they started.

The resurrection is more than the resuscitation of the physical body dead in the tomb. If it were just that, Jesus would not be unlike Lazarus, who returned to life three days after his death. But Lazarus had to die again; his return to life did not transcend the conditions of this mortal existence. The resurrected body of Jesus is a new kind of body, said Paul; it is a soma pneumatikos, a spiritual body. Yet there is continuity between the old and the new body; it is precisely the earthly mortal body that is transformed into a new mode of being, an immortal spiritual body.

We cannot know more than the earliest Christians told us on the basis of their experiences. If we do not trust their testimonies, we will not believe that Jesus really rose from the dead. Christ did not appear to them because they believed but in order that they might believe and confess that Jesus is Lord. It is therefore erroneous to interpret the primitive witness to the resurrection as a product of a hallucinating imagination of faith. The appearances of Jesus were the cause of faith, not its product. Paul was not a believer but an enemy when Christ appeared to him.

A lot of ink, both polemical and apologetic, has been spilled over the empty tomb. Does it prove the resurrection? Did someone steal the body? Was the story made up to bolster the faith of the doubting Thomases? I will not rehearse the arguments pro and con here. I only want to say that the arguments advanced by people like Hans F. von

Campenhausen and Wolfhart Pannenberg have been sufficiently persuasive that we can accept the stories of the empty tomb in the spirit in which they were written. The tomb was empty because Jesus was raised from the dead. He was no longer bodily there. Photographers could not have taken a picture of him lying in the tomb. I'll settle for what Karl Barth once said on the matter: "Christians do not believe in the empty tomb but in the living Christ," but that does not mean that "we can believe in the living Christ without believing in the empty tomb."

The resurrection and world mission

We have said there can be no authentic Christianity without belief in the resurrection of Jesus. There can be no greater heresy in the modern church than the outright denial of this article of faith.

But we should not exaggerate the problem of the resurrection in our time. Many of the Areopagites in Athens could not believe the good news of the resurrection. Perhaps it was no more credible in ancient times than today. The Hellenistic worldview was not amenable to the Easter gospel; it was foolishness then and it will always remain such except for those who see through the eyes of faith. Why do some believe and others don't? We have no answer. Resurrection faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit of God, and it's not something we can generate with all the intelligence, will, and emotion we have at our command. But perhaps we can and should do something about the state of theological education, which remains for the most part undisciplined. When Van Harvey quit teaching at a seminary because he could no longer profess basic Christian beliefs, and instead opted for a religious studies program, that made a lot of sense and exemplified something to be encouraged across the church at all levels of leadership. A good place to start would be to remove bishops from office who relegate the resurrection story to mythological status.

The most telling effect of the loss of resurrection faith in the mainline churches is the collapse of the world missionary movement. All the resurrection narratives are a summons to mission and bestow authority on the apostolic office. The apostles who saw the Lord and believed all became missionaries. The risen Lord commissioned the church to go and tell the gospel to all the nations. The missionary nature of the church from the beginning until now is grounded in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus. In the encounter with the risen Christ, the apostles were authorized and empowered to continue what Jesus began in his earthly ministry. The content of the church's missionary proclamation can be none other than Jesus Christ crucified and risen. If we don't believe in the reality of the risen Lord, there is no compelling commission and no mission. We are off the hook. Missionaries can stay home; and that is exactly what is going on.

How else can we account for the great uncertainty in the churches regarding whether it is imperative to preach the gospel to people of other faiths? Do not all religions say the same thing, only in different idioms? Are not all religions equally salvific? If Jesus is the risen Lord, that makes him different from all other putative messiahs, prophets, and religious founders. There is no need to be mission-minded if we do not believe that Jesus' resurrection is God's unique way of reclaiming the whole world for himself, and that he is the one and only way of salvation for Christians and people of other religions and no religion alike. The very reason for the church's being includes engagement in the mission of Christ to the nations. The church is the only witness and instrument that God has elected to win back the world. He has promised to be with his church to the close of the age, always accompanying his people in the power of his Spirit. When we talk about the resurrection, we are not talking merely about a historical event, of something passé, but we are talking about the present tense reality of what God is doing through the mission of the church, opening the way for all humankind to inherit the future of eternal life.

*Carl E. Braaten is cofounder of the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology, and is the author of *Mother Church: Ecclesiology and Ecumenism*. The following is adapted from "The Reality of the Resurrection," by Carl E. Braaten, Chapter 7, of *Nicene Christianity: The Future For a New Ecumenism*, edited by Christopher Seitz, Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2001.*

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WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?

Charles McCrea

When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked His disciples, saying, “Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?” And they said, “Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some Elias; and others Jeremias, or one of the prophets. He said unto them, “But who do you say that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.

The question asked Peter by Jesus Christ is one that continues to resonate down through the centuries. It is a question that many have struggled with and continue to wrestle with for an answer. It is a question for which the answer is there for each and every one of us.

Why do we struggle to answer to this simple, yet life-changing question? Who do you say that Christ is? Perhaps it is good to approach this with a life experience. Have you ever been in a situation when others have been someplace, tried some item or activity, or knew someone and you had not had the same experience? It is a challenge to talk about things we have only experienced through others. Regardless of how closely we may listen as others describe their experience, we still come up short in our ability to adequately describe ‘our’ experience. It is the difference between being told and having a first hand experience or encounter.

Many of us are able to talk about Jesus Christ as a result of our association with the church, people of faith, or our reading of the Bible and scholarly commentaries. We can talk about Jesus, but we cannot talk of Him. We cannot talk of Him because we have not surrendered our life to Him. We have not had a life-changing encounter with Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

We are able to talk of Christ when, like the paralytic, we are carried by our friends to be in His presence. Some of us need some friends who recognize how fear, shame, or guilt paralyzes us. Some friends who will be with us and take us into the presence of God in their prayers and worship.

We are able to talk of Christ when we are at that point in our life when we cannot move and know that our situation will only change if Christ ‘troubles the waters’ of our life. We then know Christ as a way maker.

Who do you say that I am?

We may know about Christ because someone’s life has changed as a result of their surrendering their life to Him. However, it is not until we have experienced Christ in the forgiveness of our sins and become ‘new creations’ that we truly know Him. When we ‘answer the knock’ and allow Christ to come into our heart, we are then able to tell others of Jesus the Christ.

When we take our burdens to the Lord and leave them there, we strengthen our faith and open our life to letting Christ use us in His service. We have first hand knowledge of the joy of serving Christ through serving others. We have first person experience of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and visiting those in prison.

Who do you say that I am?

Can you respond to that by saying Christ is a healer? One who forgives sin? One who changes life and makes us new creations? One who opens doors that only God can open? One who loves you through all of life’s situations? One who has experienced all that we experience and yet was without sin?

Who do you say that I am?

How can you answer this age old question? Know Christ yourself. Give your life to Christ and let Christ lead you. He stands at the door and knocks; we must let Him in. When we let Christ into our life, we can respond boldly to the question of ‘who do you say that I am’ because we have moved beyond knowing about Him to knowing Him.

IS PRAYER A PRIORITY IN YOUR LIFE?

Robbin Grill

Prayer is the communication that is the core of our relationship with our Heavenly Father. God as Christ came to us as we are, to make our relationship with God a special relationship. We come to God in prayer *as we are*. We are unwashed; we are messy inside; sometimes we are scared, sometimes needy, sometimes empty, sometimes bored. But we come. We come because **God has called out to us** through the scriptures and by the good news of Jesus Christ. We come trusting that through prayer God can change us, and can change the things that happen in our lives. We come trusting that God is with us and that the Holy Spirit prays with us and for us. We trust that God will lead us to lose our anger, lead us to repentance, lead us to being open to the Holy Spirit's voice, lead us to the love of God and of each other.

We, on the ERF Prayer Team, are involved in Intercessory Prayer. Now just what is different about intercessory prayer? It is not the same as prayers for ourselves or for any personal matter. It is not just praying for someone else's needs. It is praying with the real hope and real intent that God would step in and act for the good of some specific other persons. It is trusting that God will act, even if it is not in the manner or timing we seek. God wants us to ask, even urgently. We cast our weakness before God's strength and, hopefully, a bit of God's passion will burn in us.

The place where intercession must start is with each of us. God wants us to put something of ourselves on the line. Our private devotions are not just for our own benefit. If God's love is at work in us, we will care about others and our love for them will lead us to the ultimate Source of Strength, Healing and Love. We need to be persistent and stubborn! God doesn't mind; He likes to see divine love at work in us.

Sometimes we are led to be intercessors for a specific person or task. Intercessors also pray for the world, national, and local political leaders. This is in line with the church's early prayers for the Roman authorities. (1 Timothy 2:1-2) We need to be careful how we pray and not pray to do harm to others. Remember what Jesus said: "For the Son of Man did not come to destroy peoples' lives, but to save them." (Luke 9:56)

Intercessory prayer aims to build people into what God wants of them, not to tear them down.

Intercessory prayer does not work by our own power, as if we were the Almighty. When prayer is answered, it is answered in God's way, and it may not be at all like the 'victory' we are 'claiming.' A great deal of the time, the Holy Spirit's main work is to change *us*, to make *us* care more, to get *us* to focus on what others are going through instead of our own personal needs.

The ERF Prayer Team has, as one of its purposes, intercessory prayer. At the present time our communication is mostly via e-mail, keeping the members alerted to needs and updated on progress. While it would be nice to have a prayer circle, this simply is not possible with the great distance separating us. I have two requests:

- If you would like to be a part of the prayer team, please send me your name, e-mail, snail mail address and telephone number.
- If you have a prayer need or a prayer request, please let me know and I will circulate it to the members of the prayer team.

I can be reached at randagrill@hotmail.com or at robbin@rrgcpa.com. My phone number is (603) 228-0695 during the day and (603) 796-2661 evenings and weekends.

God bless each of you and remember – God does answer prayers!

The ERF leadership team is interested in learning about particular resources you may have used or know about, which can help people get to know Jesus better. We know that there are some good programs and books out there that address this topic, and we are interested in doing a survey and reporting the results. You are encouraged to report any ideas and suggestions you have on this topic to [Tom Bentum](#) and/or [Walt Ciesluk](#).

RECENT BOOKS ON CHRISTIANITY AND RENEWAL

C.S.Lewis' Case for Christ, Insights from Reason, Imagination, and Faith, Art Lindsey, Intervarsity Press, Copyright 2005

This book provides a readable introduction to C.S. Lewis's reflections on a myriad of objections to belief in Jesus Christ and the compelling reasons why Lewis came to affirm the truth of Christianity. Since he was an ardent atheist until age thirty-one, Lewis's experience and education prepared him to understand firsthand the most common arguments against Christianity." As a scholar and teacher of literature at Oxford, Lewis confronted many questions: Aren't all religions just humanly invented myths? Doesn't evil in the world indicate an absence of any personal or loving God? Why should what is true for one person be true for me, especially when it comes to religion? How can anyone claim that one religion is right? Why follow Jesus if he was just another good moral teacher?

In this book, the author, Art Lindsley, provides a helpful and reliable guide to the voluminous and sometimes challenging writings of Lewis for both seekers and those who want to grasp their own faith more deeply. Lindsley's survey explores Lewis's arguments for Christ, addressing such obstacles to faith as the problem of evil, moral relativism, other religions, the person of Jesus, and more. The book presents an impressive overview for skeptics, seekers, and believers.

Jesus Revealed, Know Him Better to Love Him Better, Mark D. Roberts, WaterBrook Press, Copyright 2002

In *Jesus Revealed: Know Him Better to Love Him Better*, scholar and pastor Mark Roberts reintroduces readers to the true Son of God. In this book, readers will encounter a Jesus who surprises and unsettles, who comforts and empowers, in astonishingly authentic ways. Each chapter focuses on one aspect of Jesus' identity—such as Rabbi, Son of Man, Light of the World. As the author explores what's behind each of these titles, he brings insight into the theological and historical meanings, and then relates them to life today.

In this book, readers will travel back to first-century Palestine, meet the God-man we know as Jesus, and experience a soul-changing encounter with him. This book will urge you to experience a soul-changing encounter with Jesus as your familiar images are stretched and clarified. It encourages you to open your heart more fully to our Lord and Savior because to see him more clearly is to love him more completely.

Jesus and the Gospels, An Introduction and Survey, Craig L. Blomberg, Broadman & Holman Publishers, Copyright 1997

This intensive guide to the Gospels surveys the largest source of eyewitness information about Jesus' life and ministry, the books of the four apostles who watched Him, spoke with Him, and served Him during his years on earth and that makes their eyewitness accounts the most significant source of information we have about the Lord. The author, Craig Blomberg surveys the Gospels in their key historical and cultural contexts to help you get the most out of them. He also tackles popular misinterpretations giving a great resource to anyone interested in the gospels.

In this book, the author systematically addresses all the following important topics: (1) a brief history of the period between Old and New Testaments as a historical backdrop for studying Jesus and first-century Israeli (2) the critical methods that scholars use to study documents like Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; (3) an "introduction proper" to each Gospel, that is, a discussion of who wrote it, when, where, to whom, with what kind of structure, under what circumstances, and with what distinctives; (4) a survey of the life of Christ, with comments on Jesus' primary teachings and actions; and (5) a synthesis of the major issues surrounding the historicity and theology of Jesus himself.

This book should be a valuable resource for thoughtful laypersons who desire to deepen their biblical knowledge and understanding, as well as pastors and scholars looking for a current summary of the spectrum of scholarship dealing with Jesus and the Gospels.

RENEWAL 2006 CONFERENCE ADDRESSES THE QUESTION, “WHO IS JESUS?”

The Question

In this day and age, everyone seems to have something to say about Jesus and it is easy for someone to become very confused about who He is. If we talk to a Buddhist or Hindu, they may acknowledge Jesus as a great holy man or enlightened teacher, but nothing more. Most Jews may concede that Jesus may have been a revolutionary rabbi, but clearly not Israel’s promised Messiah. A Muslim will have great respect for Jesus as a prophet, but will deny that he was ever executed on a cross.

Many biblical and theological scholars have not helped the situation very much by publishing numerous books in recent years, providing a myriad of viewpoints, some troubling, some puzzling, which tend to regard Jesus as a teaching sage, a religious genius, or a social revolutionary. In contrast, Christians claim that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, Lord and Savior.

Meanwhile, the popular media seems to enjoy exploiting this great disparity of opinions and belittling those who have strong views about the uniqueness and exclusivity of Jesus Christ. In this kind of environment, it is very understandable why the un-churched and even some members of our churches can become skeptical, uninterested, and indifferent to Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?”

Today Jesus is used to prop up many causes and interests in the church and this has caused confusion among both our clergy and our laity. Sometimes he is portrayed as a liberator, a mystic, or a charismatic teacher. Every vision of Jesus has its consequences in how discipleship is lived out and often divides us as God’s people. Who is the Jesus of the Bible and what does it mean to follow him? On April 1 in Manchester, NH, the Evangelical Renewal Fellowship is bringing Dr. Ben Witherington, III to help us think through and understand this vital issue in the church. His presentation promises to be very informative, entertaining, and even transforming.

The Featured Speaker

Dr. Witherington is a United Methodist, a New Testament scholar and professor at Asbury Theological Seminary. He is the author of numerous books including *The Jesus Quest* (IVP 1995). He is a prolific writer and speaker and a graduate of Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary. He speaks clearly to both laity and clergy alike. At RENEWAL 2004 conference, Dr. Witherington very authoritatively addressed another crucial question, “Can We Trust the Bible?”

Conference Program

The RENEWAL 2006 conference will take place at The Best Western Executive Court Inn, Manchester, New Hampshire March 31 & April 1, 2005. The 1 April, Saturday program begins with breakfast and an opportunity to talk with Bishop Peter Weaver about congregational development or other issues that may be of interest. The plenary session with Dr. Ben Witherington III begins at 9:30 a.m. and concludes at 2:30 p.m. after an hour lunch break beginning at 11:30 a.m. The 31 March, Friday evening program beginning at 7 p.m. is the board meeting for ERF. All members of ERF are members of the board. Anyone may attend the board meeting, but only members may vote. The board meeting will consist of prayer, hearing reports of ERF leaders, and goal setting for the future.

More Information

The Purpose of the RENEWAL conference is to provide fellowship, encouragement, and vision for United Methodists in New England. It is sponsored by Evangelical Renewal Fellowship, the New England Association of the Confessing Movement within the United Methodist Church. For more information on the RENEWAL 2006 conference, visit the ERF web site at www.RenewNE.org. A full color brochure and application for the Renewal 2006 conference are available at www.renewne.org/Renewal_2006_Brochure.pdf, and www.renewne.org/Renewal_2006_Application.pdf, respectively. You can also contact Pastor Tom Bentum at tbentum@clergy.net with any questions.

Evangelical Renewal Fellowship

16 Church St.

Lancaster, NH 03584

603-788-2734

Web site: www.RenewNE.org

E-mail: tbentum@clergy.net

Purpose Statement

Confessing Jesus Christ as Son, Savior, and Lord, the Confessing Movement exists to enable the United Methodist Church to retrieve its classical doctrinal identity, and to live it out as disciples of Jesus Christ

ERF Executive Team (1 July 2005-30 June 2007)

Executive Coordinator: **Pastor Tom Bentum**

Communications Coordinator: **Walter Ciesluk**

Conference Relations Coordinator: **Pastor Michael Pike**

Legislative Action Coordinator: **Pastor Brian Wood**

Membership Secretary: **Tammy Souza**

Prayer Coordinator: **Robbin Grill**

Recording Secretary: **Pastor Richard Pagano**

Regional Events Coordinator: **Pastor Dan Weaver**

RENEWAL Conference Director: **Pastor Tom Bentum**

Target Group Coordinator: **Pastor Brian Souza**

Treasurer: **Pastor Lloyd Leeman**