

## Chapter 1

### *The Influence of Jesus*

*William G. Johnsson*

Of all the names given children since the dawn of time, one stands alone, solitary, immovable. Although many men and women now take that name in oath or jest, one day every knee in heaven and earth will bow before Him who bears it and declare that He is King of kings and Lord of lords. That name is the sweetest sound to come from infant lips; it sustains us through life; and it will be our security when we embark on our final journey.

Jesus.

All our hopes - for this world and the next - center in Him. Our best joys, our highest aspirations, our cleanest motivations, spring from Him. Every other name will pass away; His, never.

In a recent book Lee Strobel describes a revealing moment during a conversation with a renowned atheist. Strobel, a trial lawyer and journalist, arranged to interview Charles Templeton in preparing the manuscript for what became *The Case for Faith*. Templeton was once a Christian minister and a close friend and associate of Billy Graham. But he began to doubt the reliability of the Bible and shared his arguments with the young Graham. Graham wrestled with the concerns raised by his friend, decided that the Bible was trustworthy, and went into the Los Angeles evangelistic campaign that catapulted him on a long and remarkable career as the preacher who would speak to more people worldwide than any person in the history of Christianity. Templeton, however, chose the opposite course; he resigned from the ministry and devoted his life to attacking belief in God.

As Strobel probed the critical points in Templeton's journey, Templeton revealed that a picture of a starving child in drought-stricken Africa first led him to doubt the existence of

## THE ESSENTIAL JESUS

God. If there were a God, all He had to do was send rain, but no rain came. So, Templeton concluded, God didn't exist, or if He did exist, He was either powerless to help or a monster. It would be the first of a plethora of arguments Templeton, now in his eighties, would marshal during the course of a long life.

It was late in the interview, and Templeton had laid out a compelling case for his rejection of faith. Then Strobel put a question that abruptly changed the tenor of the conversation: "And so how do you assess this Jesus?" The change in the avowed atheist was dramatic.

"Templeton's body language softened. It was as if he suddenly felt relaxed and comfortable in talking about an old and dear friend. His voice, which at times had displayed such a sharp and insistent edge, now took on a melancholy and reflective tone. His guard seemingly down, he spoke in an unhurried pace, almost nostalgically, carefully choosing his words as he talked about Jesus.

" 'He was,' Templeton began, 'the greatest human being who has ever lived. He was a moral genius. His ethical sense was unique. He was the intrinsically wisest person that I've ever encountered in my life or in my readings. His commitment was total and led to his own death, much to the detriment of the world. What could one say about him except that this was a form of greatness?'

"I was taken aback. 'You sound like you really care about him,' I said.

" 'Well, yes, he's the most important thing in my life,' came his reply. 'I ... I ... I,' he stuttered, searching for the right word, 'I know it may sound strange, but I have to say ... I adore him!'

"I wasn't sure how to respond. 'You say that with some emotion,' I said.

" 'Well, yes. Everything good I know, everything decent I know, everything pure I know, I learned from Jesus. Yes ... yes. And tough! Just look at Jesus. He castigated people. He was angry. People don't think of him that way, but they don't

read the Bible. He had a righteous anger. He cared for the oppressed and exploited.

There's no question that he had the highest moral standard, the least duplicity, the greatest compassion, of any human being in history. There have been many other wonderful people, but Jesus is Jesus.'

" 'And so the world would do well to emulate him?'

" 'Oh, my goodness, yes! I have tried - and try is as far as I can go - to act as I have believed he would act. That doesn't mean I could read his mind, because one of the most fascinating things about him was that he often did the opposite thing you'd expect - '

"Abruptly, Templeton cut short his thoughts. There was a brief pause, almost as if he was uncertain whether he should continue.

" 'Uh ... but ... no,' he said slowly, 'he's the most ...' He stopped, then started again. 'In my view,' he declared, 'he is the most important human being who has ever existed.'

"That's when Templeton uttered the words I never expected to hear from him. 'And if I may put it this way,' he said as his voice began to crack, 'I... miss ... him!'

"With that, tears flooded his eyes. He turned his head and looked downward, raising his left hand to shield his face from me. His shoulders bobbed as he wept."

After more than half a century of convincing himself and trying to convince others that the Christian faith was nonsense, Templeton had not escaped the influence of Jesus Christ. The mention of Jesus' name brought back associations of a friendship once treasured but long severed and still longed for.

I agree with Templeton's assessment and would modify it only to assert that Jesus was not only the most important person who ever lived, but by far the most important.

A remarkable thing about this Man is that the centuries as they pass do not lessen His influence. He is the Man who will not go away. He still makes the cover of the world's leading news magazines. Thus, in a Time cover story titled "Jesus of

Nazareth: Then and Now,” biblical scholar Reynolds Price asserts:

“The memory of any stretch of years eventually resolves to a list of names, and one of the useful ways of recalling the past two millennia is by listing the people who acquired great power. Muhammad, Catherine the Great, Marx, Gandhi, Hitler, Roosevelt, Stalin and Mao come quickly to mind. There’s no question that each of those figures changed the lives of millions and evoked responses from worship through hatred.

“It would require much exotic calculation, however, to deny that the single most powerful figure - not merely in these two millennia but in all human history - - has been Jesus of Nazareth. Not only is the prevalent system of denoting the years based on an erroneous sixth-century calculation of the date of his birth, but a serious argument can be made that no one else’s life has proved remotely as powerful and enduring as that of Jesus.”

To attempt to chronicle the influence of this Man stretches the limits of the intellect and bursts the confines of a single chapter in this book. At best I can present slices of history, vignettes, episodes. The whole story is as marvelous and as far flung as the myriads of men and women, and boys and girls for whom Jesus of Nazareth has been, and is, Saviour and Lord. Of course, there are some negative voices also to be heard; and although I write as a confirmed believer in Jesus, I shall try to be fair to them.

In this brief overview of Jesus’ influence, we shall focus on three periods: Jesus’ influence during His lifetime, His influence after His death, and His influence in our times.

### **Jesus in His Own Times**

Although occasionally during the course of history voices have been raised calling into question whether Jesus actually existed, these have never been taken seriously. Even by the most vehement critics of Christianity, the fact of Jesus is a given. The issues debated over the centuries have not been

## THE ESSENTIAL JESUS

whether there was such a man but rather who He thought He was and who He really was.

The One whom subsequent generations would acclaim as the most important person of all time made only a minor impact on the world of His day - here is the supreme irony. The nature of His personality, the values for which He stood, and the purpose of His living and dying were alien to the Caesars and the empire they ruled. By far the greatest amount of material about Him was left, not by historians and poets, but by people whose lives were profoundly influenced by Him and for whom Jesus became the object of faith.

Nevertheless, Jesus left a trail in His own times outside the writings of the Bible. The Jewish historian Josephus, born A.D. 37, makes two references to Jesus in *The Antiquities*. One of these, the *Testimonium Flavianum*, has been disputed over the years because of the explicitness of the material; today it is considered authentic overall, but with some doctoring by Christian copyists.

The Roman historian Tacitus likewise corroborated the death of "Christus" by crucifixion during the governorship of Pontius Pilate. Other Jewish and Roman writings supply additional supporting references.

The stark fact that emerges from these extra-biblical sources is: Jesus died on a Roman cross. He was executed! This was no ordinary Jew; in some way and at some level Jesus was considered a threat by the ruling authorities. Crucifixion was Rome's supreme deterrent for troublemakers: its painfully slow death was deliberately put on public display so that anyone who might harbor thoughts of rebellion or lawbreaking would get the message.

The barest factual minimum, then - that the Jew Jesus was crucified by the Romans - introduces us inexorably to a life that influenced those in its own day.

As we still seek to understand Jesus in His own time from outside the circle of faith, we are confronted with another historical datum - the Gospels. This Man spawned not one attempt to record His life and death and who He was, but four

## THE ESSENTIAL JESUS

accounts. In fact, beyond the writings we know as Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, “many” efforts were made in the first century that centered in Him (see Luke 1:1-4). The Gospel enterprise continued into the second century and included increasingly legendary and fantastic material. The four Gospels of the New Testament with which we are familiar are the survivors of a sifting and winnowing process among the early Christians.

There is another historical fact in connection with these Gospels: the pagans attempted to produce their own counterpart, one based on an alleged miracle worker, Appolonius of Tyana. Although Appolonius lived in the first century, his biographer, Philostratus, only wrote a century and a half later when the Gospels had circulated widely.

What sort of life attracts a biographer? One that has influence.

What sort of life attracts not one biographer but many? One that influenced many other lives.

What sort of biography stirs the elements of the established religious order to countermand it by imitation? One that threatens the survival of the old order.

I have referred to “biographers” above, but the four Gospels of the New Testament are not biographies as we understand the term. They are selective, omitting large periods of Jesus’ life; they concentrate on the brief period of His public ministry, but even here they do not attempt to follow strict order or to cover its various phases proportionately; they devote inordinate attention to the final week of His life and His death, and they proceed from a stance of faith in Jesus and invite the reader also to believe - they are faith histories.

These four accounts overlap, repeat materials, disagree in some details but agree in major points. The overall outline of Jesus’ life and death, and the impact of His person is the same for each: Jesus dominates every account.

Why four Gospels - why not only one? Each is different but complements the others. Each is powerful, but the combined effect is massive in the composite portrait of Jesus

## THE ESSENTIAL JESUS

that emerges. It is as though this Man is too big to be comprehended in any one telling.

“There is variety in a tree; there are scarcely two leaves just alike. Yet this variety adds to the perfection of the tree as a whole.

“In our Bible, we might ask, Why need Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in the Gospels, why need the Acts of the Apostles, and the variety of writers in the Epistles, go over the same thing?

“The Lord gave His word in just the way He wanted it to come. He gave it through different writers, each having his own individuality, though going over the same history. Their testimonies are brought together in one Book, and are like the testimonies in a social meeting. They do not represent things in just the same style. Each has an experience of his own, and this diversity broadens and deepens the knowledge that is brought out to meet the necessities of varied minds. The thoughts expressed have not a set uniformity, as if cast in an iron mold, making the very hearing monotonous. In such uniformity there would be a loss of grace and distinctive beauty.”

To these four accounts we now turn to gain a more accurate reading of Jesus' influence in His own day. Under the impact of rationalistic investigation generated by the Enlightenment, the Gospels have been intensely scrutinized for more than two hundred years. Some of the keenest intellects attempted to apply the “scientific method” to the Gospels with the supreme goal of unlocking the historical Jesus, an endeavor brilliantly described and critiqued by Dr. Albert Schweitzer in his *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* in the early twentieth century. After Schweitzer, Bultmann reigned as king with a radical pessimism that relegated the New Testament accounts to myths generated by the early church, leaving Jesus essentially as an “X” who died on a Roman cross. But the disciples of Bultmann, notably Ernst Kasemann, turned away from their professor in a new quest of the historical Jesus that attempted to separate myth from history in the Gospel accounts; and the

endeavor has recently taken on a new life in the work of the Jesus Seminar.

Despite all the effort expended, this two-centuries-long quest to recover the historical Jesus from the Gospels must be deemed to be flawed. The application of a detached, “scientific method” to these documents misses the most basic feature of the Gospels - that they proceed from a stance of faith and are written to awaken faith. Lacking this key ingredient the investigation employs a flawed methodology, incongruent with the subject matter. The absurd lengths to which its proponents are prepared to go has come to full flower in the work of the Jesus Seminar, where a group of self-selected scholars determine what is authentic in the Gospels by casting ballots!

In this study we assume the reliability of the Gospel accounts. These documents were all written in the first century, and Matthew, Mark and Luke circulated when many contemporaries of Jesus were still alive to refute or correct them if they had been built on myth.

As we work through the Gospels with an eye for the influence of Jesus, we see in each a portrayal of a mass movement centered in Galilee. Jesus was a populist leader who attracted large crowds wherever He went and whose influence led to growing concern on the part of the religious establishment. The authorities fairly soon came to regard Jesus as a threat to their power and tried to find ways to thwart His movement; eventually they concluded that the only way His influence could be controlled was to eliminate Him.

Mark’s Gospel is the shortest and most direct of the four canonical accounts because it focuses on the acts of Jesus with relatively little space given to His teachings. It may also have been the first of the four to be written, although that idea cannot be established conclusively and is debated by scholars. Mark provides us with the logical place to start as we explore the influence of Jesus’ public ministry, leaving until later consideration of the events of the final week of His life.

Mark begins the ministry with the calling of the first disciples (1:14-20). The account is crisp and moves at a fast



## THE ESSENTIAL JESUS

clip: Jesus walks beside the Lake of Galilee, sees Simon and Andrew casting a net into the water, and bids them: “Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” At once they leave their nets and follow Him. He walks on a little further, meets the brothers James and John, and likewise calls them. They too leave everything to become disciples.

Much is left unsaid in this brief telling. What did Simon and Andrew, then James and John say to Jesus - or did they say anything at all? What motivated them to make a decision, seemingly on the spot, that would radically change their future?

Mark does not let us in on this play and counter play of emotions and reasonings. He simply gives the minimum facts, and these facts leave us with a first impression of Jesus as a dynamic personality for whom people are ready to renounce their livelihood.

Now follows an account of Jesus’ exorcism in the synagogue at Capernaum (1:21-28). Mark records that Jesus began to teach, but he doesn’t tell us what He was teaching. Instead, he emphasizes the impression Jesus’ teachings made on the assembled hearers - they are “amazed,” because He taught as one who had authority. But Jesus’ instruction is suddenly interrupted by a shriek from a demon-possessed man who identifies Jesus as “the Holy One of God.” Jesus commands the demon to be silent and to come out of him, and the demon does so. And, says Mark, the people now are even more amazed, and word about Jesus quickly spreads over the whole region of Galilee.

Then Jesus and His disciples leave the synagogue and go to the home of Simon and Andrew. Simon’s mother-in-law is lying in bed with a fever; but Jesus takes her hand, the fever leaves her, and she gets up. That evening, after the Sabbath, the whole town gathers at the door. They bring the sick and the demon-possessed, and Jesus heals them (1:29-34).

Early the next morning Jesus is up and out of the house, praying alone in a solitary place. Simon and his companions seek Him out and exclaim: “Everyone is looking for you!” But

## THE ESSENTIAL JESUS

Jesus refuses to stay in Capernaum; He commences an itinerant ministry of preaching and exorcisms throughout Galilee.

We have only begun the Gospel, but Mark has yet another incident for the reader to notice (1:40-45). A leper comes to Jesus, falls on his knees, and begs for cleansing. Jesus, filled with compassion, reaches out His hand, touches him, and says, "Be clean!" And, relates Mark, "immediately" the leprosy leaves him, and he is cured. Jesus tells the man to keep the news to himself, but he tells everyone he meets. As a result Jesus can no longer go about in public. He stays outside the towns, but even so people come to Him from everywhere.

All this in only two pages of Mark's Gospel! Mark has succeeded in conveying a powerful impression of Jesus as a dynamic, charismatic figure whose acts amaze the populace, set them talking, and have them flocking to hear and see Him.

The subsequent chapters merely fill out this portrait. Jesus is beset by crowds everywhere He goes. People come to hear Him from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, and the regions across the Jordan and around Tyre and Sidon (3 :8). Because of the press Jesus has to teach from a boat in the water (v. 9). He is so busy that He doesn't have time even to eat (3:20; 6:31), and His family thinks He is losing His balance (3:21). He feeds large crowds - 5,000 men on one occasion (6:44), 4,000 on another (8:9). And everywhere He goes the people are "overwhelmed with amazement" (7:37).

But the religious leaders are not impressed. They accuse Him of blasphemy (2:6, 7); of casting out demons by Beelzebub, prince of demons (3:22); of disregard for the Sabbath (2:24; 3:2). And they begin to plot His demise (3:6).

Mark's portrait of Jesus, graphic and compelling, rings with verisimilitude. We see Jesus as leader of a people movement that sweeps Galilee and attracts many from the surrounding regions.

The other three biblical accounts lead to similar conclusions concerning the influence of Jesus during His lifetime. Although each Gospel is shaped differently with particular concerns and emphases, we see the same factors: large crowds, amazement

## THE ESSENTIAL JESUS

and wonder at Jesus' deeds, speculation as to who He is, hostility from the religious establishment until it determines to have Him put to death. And Jesus, predicting that betrayal, mocking, scourging and death await Him at Jerusalem, eventually sets out to observe the Passover in the city that will bring His ministry and life to an end.

John's Gospel, obviously written after the others, adds a significant element. All four writers record the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000, but only John tells us: "After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, 'Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.' Jesus, knowing they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself" (John 6:14, 15).

For the people of Galilee, then, Jesus was not merely a messianic figure but the Messiah, the one long awaited who would bring deliverance to the nation. "All day the conviction has strengthened. That crowning act is assurance that the long-looked-for Deliverer is among them. The hopes of the people rise higher and higher. This is He who will make Judea an earthly paradise, a land flowing with milk and honey. He can satisfy every desire. He can break the power of the hated Romans. He can deliver Judah and Jerusalem. He can heal the soldiers who are wounded in battle. He can supply whole armies with food. He can conquer the nations, and give to Israel the long-sought dominion."

But Jesus refused to be the king they wanted. At last He set out on His final journey to Jerusalem. He entered the city on the Sunday before Passover as a popular hero, riding on a donkey as the Scriptures had foretold (Zech. 9:9), with crowds lining the route, laying down palm branches and garments, and shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the King of Israel!" (John 12:12, 13).

Before the week was over He hung dying on a Roman cross. The crowds who hailed Him on Sunday as their King cried out on Friday: "Crucify Him!"

Over His head an inscription was nailed to the cross. The Gospel writers record it differently:

Matthew: "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews" (27:37).

Mark: "The King of the Jews" (15:26).

Luke: "This is the King of the Jews" (23:38).

John: "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" (19:19).

The differences are intriguing, but ultimately of small consequence. What counts is the phrase common to all: "The King of the Jews." That speaks volumes about the perception of Jesus on the part of both Jewish and Roman authorities - He was a threat. Each group no doubt perceived Him differently, but for each He was a challenge that could be removed only by execution.

### **The Influence of Jesus After His Lifetime**

If the enemies of Jesus thought they could crush the populist movement in His name by putting Him to death, they met with a rude shock. The events surrounding His crucifixion would propel His person and teachings onto a global arena; a Jewish affair would become a world religion. His followers would not attempt to cover up or explain away the crucifixion; rather, the cross - His cross - would become the symbol of the new faith.

The Gospel writers let us in on a curious bit of history: whereas the followers of Jesus were crushed by His death, the religious authorities remained apprehensive. The former entertained no hope that anything good would come from Jesus' tomb; the latter feared that something might happen, and set a guard to keep Jesus sealed shut forever.

But their plans were thwarted. The tomb that they planned to be the burial place of the Jesus movement became its motivating power. Despite the guard, despite precautions, the body of Jesus vanished. Jesus the crucified appeared to His followers alive from the dead, Lord of life and conqueror of the grave. It was a message that would touch the existential longings of humanity in all ages; it was unstoppable.

## THE ESSENTIAL JESUS

That Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead is a confession of faith. “He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen - by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead,” affirmed the apostle Peter (Acts 10:41). Nevertheless, the resurrection happened within history and, if true, is the most amazing event in human experience and the capstone of Christianity. It, more than any other fact or teaching associated with this remarkable individual called Jesus, is the reason for His vast and continuing influence.

Not surprisingly, those not of faith dispute His resurrection. The theories and efforts began very early with the story that His disciples stole the body and spread false reports that they had seen him alive (Matt. 28:11-15). Subsequent attempts to rebut Christianity would allege that He did not really die, that His “appearances” to the disciples resulted from their “wish fulfillment” state of mind, and so on.

Two facts, indisputable and irrefutable, confront both the historian and the religious seeker - the empty tomb and the rise of the new religion.

The body disappeared: this is fact. Enemies of Christianity could have made hay of the new faith if they could have produced Jesus’ remains. But they could not. Given that fact, the claims of Jesus’ followers that He had risen from the dead demanded - and demand - consideration.

Out of the ashes of disappointment and blasted dreams a new, confident, joyous faith emerged: this is fact. Defeat became victory. A little band of dispirited commoners became apostles of hope. Their message spread on the wings of the wind, flooding over the regions where Jesus lived and died, pouring into lands far beyond until it reached Rome, capital of the empire whose governor had issued the death order for Jesus. Within a generation - by the time of Paul - it had won converts within the imperial court (Phil. 1:13). And still it rolled on - west, and east, and north, and south, unstoppable, dynamic. It spread among slaves and soldiers; it penetrated at last the household of Caesar himself. The old order opposed it, fought it - and finally succumbed.

## THE ESSENTIAL JESUS

“Christ is risen!” “Jesus is Lord!” - was ever religion planted in less promising soil? A crucified Messiah? - what nonsense! No wonder Paul wrote that the idea was offensive to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks (1 Cor. 1:23). But it was the genius of the new, unstoppable faith.

On a transatlantic flight I found myself seated next to a woman who spends much of her life fighting injustice and discrimination. We talked for hours in a frank exchange of views and experiences, and then she let drop the \$64,000 question: “Please help me understand how a person with your values can be part of a religious organization when religion has been used to crush the weak and helpless.”

How true! That is the other side, the dark side of the influence of Jesus.

The gentle Jesus eschewed violence; His followers went marching to battle with the cross as their emblem.

The poor man Jesus did not have a place to lay His head; His followers built palaces and cathedrals lined with gold.

The humble Jesus owned but one garment of any worth; His followers donned the finest and the costliest.

The just man Jesus identified with the poor; His followers lived luxuriously on the backs of the poor.

The righteous man Jesus opened the gates of the kingdom to the dispossessed, the outcasts, the marginalized; His followers threw up barriers of social standing, caste, and gender.

We can live with the pain of this history - and the history continues in the slick, polished appearances of televangelists and other distortions - only by drawing a line between Jesus and those who claimed to be His followers. Let us confess it: in His name evil, even diabolical deeds have been perpetuated; but Jesus would have been horrified by them. The dark side of the influence of Jesus has not been that of Jesus Himself but of those who took His name and abused it.

In any religion, where church joins with state, the mix is unholy.

## THE ESSENTIAL JESUS

In the name of God fearsome deeds - of torture, persecution, cruelty - find justification. And Christianity was not immune from the corrupting influence of power.

But that is not the whole story. A fair reading of that same history of Christianity must acknowledge that the influence of Jesus has been a continuing power for good.

For more than a thousand years He was the central and decisive figure in Western civilization, inspiring its art, music, and literature, focusing its energies and sculpture in cathedrals erected to His glory over long periods. The high moral values that flowed from His life - the dignity of each person as a child of God, purity, family, justice, truth, honesty - shaped society profoundly. The influence of Jesus led to noble lives: to men and women who devoted themselves to serve the sick, the maimed, the dying; to courage and bravery in bringing hope and healing to people in darkness; to hospitals and hospices, to schools and universities to improve the lot of humanity because this man Jesus who died on the cross died for every person and thereby showed that every person is precious in the eyes of the one God.

Among the multitude who have enriched humanity by lives of loving service, none shines brighter than Albert Schweitzer. This brilliant theologian and philosopher, exponent of the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, holder of triple doctorates (in Theology, Philosophy, and Medicine), winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, gave up a glowing career to found a mission hospital in French Equatorial Africa.

Schweitzer's study of the historical Jesus remains the definitive volume on the subject, but at the end of his penetrating account Schweitzer takes the reader beyond historical analysis: "Jesus means something to our world because a mighty spiritual force streams from Him and flows through our time also. This fact can neither be shaken nor confirmed by any historical discovery. It is the solid foundation of Christianity." Schweitzer closes his epic work with these haunting words: "He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who

knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: 'Follow thou me!' and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is."

Schweitzer's volume was published originally in German in 1906, at the height of his fame. His gripping final paragraph invites the reader to know Jesus - not by historical study - but by following Him in obedience. Which was what Schweitzer was about to do: he would go back to school, earn yet another doctorate (Medicine) and forsake Europe for a life among the poor of Africa.

There is one more fact we should take note of, one that affects all people, whether believers or agnostics. From what towering event is all history reckoned? Dr. W. H. Fitchett replies: "From the birth of a Jew, who, on the skeptical theory, if He ever existed, was a peasant in an obscure province in a far-off age; who wrote no book, made no discovery, invented no philosophy, built no temple; a peasant who died when, as men count years, He had scarcely reached His prime, and died the death of a criminal... Yet civilized time is dated from the birth of this Jew! The centuries carry His signature, and the years of the modern world are labeled by universal consent the 'years of our Lord.' ...

"Every morning all the newspapers of the civilized world ... readjust their date to His cradle. Each year as it arrives, is baptized with His name. Calendars and acts of Parliament, business, and politics, and literature - the very dates on our checks and letters - all are thus unconsciously adjusted to the chronology of Christ's life. To write a human signature on Time itself, to put a human name on the brow of the hurrying centuries - this is a marvelous achievement: Caesar has not done it, nor Shakespeare, nor Newton. Genius is vain to accomplish such a task; the sword is vain; wealth is vain. But this Jew has done it ....



“No conqueror’s sword has ever cut deeply enough on Time to leave an enduring mark .... Only one name survived; only one figure was visible across wide spaces of perished time.

“The incarnate Son of God, the Word made flesh, who has come into the world’s history to shape it to a new pattern - it is fitting that to Him all the years should pay the unconscious homage of bearing His name. The Christianized calendar represents the seal of Christ’s kingship on Time itself. But to believe that a remote impostor, in a forgotten province of a perished empire, stamped Himself so deeply on Time as to compel all the centuries to bear His name, is to believe that a child, with its box of colors, could changed the tint of all the oceans!”

Jesus of Nazareth lived and died long ago, but His influence lives on. Uncounted thousands of men and women, young people, and boys and girls along the shores of the Galilee of daily living hear His call, “Follow me!” and, like vast numbers over the course of the centuries, leave their all to follow Him. In Him alone they find peace, fulfillment, meaning and joy; and they rise with Him to a new and better life that brings the kingdom of God down on earth.

### **The Influence of Jesus in Our Day**

The twentieth century produced a quantum shift in thinking, values and behavior. So far the impact has been less obvious in North America than in other Western societies, but that will change. The world our children and grandchildren will grow up in, the world that must hear the good news about Jesus, will be more alien to the Man of Galilee than in any period since He first appeared.

It is a world of meaningless death and therefore meaningless life. Death strikes savagely, suddenly, randomly, and there is no point in trying to find any meaning in existence. Already the forces that shape culture - movies, television, music, radio, books - convey the message that life is a “dirty joke,” as Hemingway put it. That theme will dominate.

## THE ESSENTIAL JESUS

It is a world without God. Many people cling to the trappings of Christianity, but God is less and less a motivating force in their lives; on the practical level they are atheists. And intellectuals unleash an aggressive atheism, challenging people to face the consequences of a universe where everything can be accounted for by natural means - a world where we no longer need God.

It is a world without good or evil. Without God, good and evil, right and wrong, truth and error cease to have meaning. What is right is what is right for me - there can be no absolute standard.

The implications of such thinking are horrendous. Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias recounts an experience at Oxford University. After Zacharias' presentation, "a student came up along with others, to challenge the possibility of God's existence. He went on to say that God did not exist, good and evil did not exist, and that we had just created these categories to control people and put fear into people's lives. I asked him a question: 'If I brought a baby to you, and then took a knife and cut that baby up into pieces, would you think I have done something immoral?' He did not even pause, and answered, 'I would not like it, but I would not think you have done anything immoral.'"

It is a world where Eastern religions replace Christianity. Once Christian missionaries went out from the West to lands abroad; now disciples of Krishna, Buddha, and Mohammed propagate their religions in the West. Ideas such as reincarnation and self-deification (I am god!) infiltrate the media and permeate the culture.

It is a world where visual images dominate. They bombard us on every side, profoundly influencing perception and decisions. Feeling takes precedence to reason - if it feels right, it is right - and fantasy merges with reality.

It is a world surfeiting in pleasure. Pleasure becomes the goal of life. The excitement of an "affair," the sensory rush of alcohol or other drugs, the thrill of high-risk sports and

adventures - these seek to capture the flying moment and give meaning to life.

Zacharias sums up the thinking that will dominate the twenty-first century: "Philosophically, you can believe anything, so long as you do not claim it to be true. Morally, you can practice anything, so long as you do not claim that it is a 'better way.' Religiously, you can hold to anything, so long as you do not bring Jesus Christ into it. If a spiritual idea is eastern, it is granted critical immunity; if western, it is thoroughly criticized."

Jesus: He is the one who does not fit in this picture. He makes people uncomfortable, so they look the other way. When they do allow Him into the conversation, they make clear that, if He is a god, He is but one among many gods.

Yet His name is uttered a billion times or more every day. Most often the use is profane, without thought. Even in a secular age Jesus is somehow never far away.

That name is also uttered by many millions of people in reverent tones. These people state without hesitation that Jesus indeed is alive, because they know Him intimately as Saviour, Lord, and Friend. Across nearly 2,000 years they find a bridge of shared experience with the Christians of the first century: "Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy" (1 Pet. 1:8).

The influence of Jesus still reaches out and calls people from all walks of life. Not only the nameless faces in the crowd, those who are never featured on the evening news or in the pages of *People Magazine* - no, men and women in public life, prominent scholars, writers, and artists still hear his call. Some, like Albert Schweitzer, obey; and an agnostic Oxford don becomes the Christian apologist C. S. Lewis. A Cambridge scientist Prof. John Polkinghorne becomes a Christian and enters the Anglican priesthood. And a skeptical and curmudgeonly journalist, Malcolm Muggeridge, ends up writing *Jesus Rediscovered*.

"Fiat lux! Let there be light!" he writes. "So everything began at God's majestic command; so it might have continued

till the end of time - history unending - except that You intervened, shining another light into the innermost recesses of the human will, where the ego reigns and reaches out in tentacles of dark desire. Having seen this other light, I turn to it, striving and growing toward it as plants do toward the sun. The light of love, abolishing the darkness of hate; the light of peace, abolishing the darkness of strife and confusion; the light of life, abolishing the darkness of death; the light of creativity, abolishing the darkness of destruction. Though, in terms of history, the darkness falls, blacking out us and our world, You have overcome history. You came as light into the world in order that whoever believed in You should not remain in darkness. Your light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. Nor ever will.”

Nor are Seventh-day Adventists lacking among prominent people of our day for whom Jesus is the motivating force in life and profession. Any list will perforce be long, so a few examples must suffice: Dr. Benjamin Carson, world-renowned neurosurgeon, rated by Time magazine among “the best;” Dr. Leonard Bailey, of infant heart-transplant fame at Loma Linda University; Herbert Blomstedt, world acclaimed conductor of symphony orchestras; Wintley Phipps, singer at prayer breakfasts through a series of United States Presidents; Dr. Samson Kisekka, first prime minister of free Uganda; and so on.

Is this why Jesus won't go away? So long as men and women find in Him peace, joy, hope and strength for their day-by-day lives, Jesus' influence will never wane. So long as multitudes can rise up and declare that through Him and in Him they find power for new and better living - power that is strong enough to break the chains of debasing and debilitating habits - the world that would shrug Him off or curse Him away will have to deal with Jesus.

Without Jesus, we are alone in a vast, cold universe. Without Jesus, we are mere specks, meaningless creatures in a meaningless existence. Without Jesus, kindness, purity, nobility, truth, justice, and even love have no moral value, because the

## THE ESSENTIAL JESUS

universe is amoral. Without Jesus, life is empty: this is all there is, we only come around once, and then it is all over.

But if Jesus is alive, we are not alone. God has come close, is with us. We are special, valued, loved, even with an everlasting love that empties heaven. We have dignity because we are sons and daughters of the King who plans for us an eternal future in his presence. Life throbs with purpose as we follow in the footsteps of the Man of Galilee, carrying onward His loving ministry of hope, healing, forgiveness, and new life.

Jesus won't go away. People can try, as some have done, to argue that He never existed, that the whole story is a myth, a legend. When that fails, they can deny that we have reliable sources and so deny His miracles and resurrection. When the Gospels are shown to withstand scrutiny, they can deny that Jesus was anything more than a man, or thought of Himself so. When they are forced to accept that He made amazing claims about Himself and His relationship to God, their final tack is to reason that He was crazy.

Would to God that the world had more such crazy people!

At the end of the day, Jesus is still here. He won't go away. After all the scholarship, the books, the articles, the songs, the plays, the movies, He is still alive.

Like those in His own time, people today give various answers when He asks, "Who do they say I am?" But then He turns the question around, speaking to us with existential force: "But what about you? Who do you say I am?" (Matt. 16:13-15).

That question, and the answer the followers of Jesus have given and still give, sets apart Christianity among the world's religions. Christianity is bound up in a person in a manner totally different from Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Shintoism, Zoroastrianism, or whatever. Not teachings, not ethics, not lifestyle but Jesus - that is the difference.

This question haunts our secular, materialistic twenty-first century. We can reject Jesus, but we can never forget Him. Like Charles Templeton, we will always miss Him.

But those who answer with Peter: "You are the Christ, the son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16) find that their leap of faith

## THE ESSENTIAL JESUS

has a soft landing. “We accept man’s testimony, but God’s testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life” (1 John 5:9-12).