

On the Use of Consensus in Historical Jesus Studies

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On the Use of Consensus in Historical Jesus Studies

With increasing regularity, scholars are using the phenomenon of consensus as a load-bearing device in their arguments. This is surely not a welcome development. In recent years, this reflex has borne so many serious methodological shortcomings as to call the critical value of naming a consensus into question. It should be recognized that a statement of consensus does not stand for anything beyond itself, much less a legitimate, self-sufficient suasion for the views it represents. Michael Goulder, no stranger to minority positions, correctly warns, «experience, if not common sense, ought to disabuse us of the simple notion that the truth will conquer with time.»¹ Of course, that naming a consensus is not really argumentational is only common sense, but rhetoric has a way of obfuscating common sense. This article aims at showing that a great deal of rhetoric attaching itself to the pursuit and interpretation of a consensus in historical Jesus studies has hidden much of the truth concerning both the state of questions and proper methodology.

Clearly, naming a consensus is helpful in several ways. The state of a question is always noteworthy in itself. More importantly, the phenomenon of consensus also makes the life of a scholar livable. Since all scholarly inquiries are ultimately intertwined, our own finitude often requires us to appeal to the *status communis* on questions which lie beyond our own competence, simply to facilitate conversation within our own areas of competence. Each of us can attempt to be truly critical only within a limited range of questions. In our necessary reliance – direct and indirect – on criticism beyond that range of questions, we all exercise faith in the work of others. There are many related reasons for mentioning what the consentient view on a question might be, but for all of them, the function of a legitimate consensus reference remains strictly analagous.²

¹ M.D. Goulder, *Is Q a Juggernaut?* JBL 115 (1996) 667-81 (668).

² Although he admits a qualified use of expert opinion as «evidence», I do not think that I.M. Copi's position is really so different: «This method of argument is not always strictly fallacious, for the reference to an admitted authority in the special field of his competence may carry great weight and constitute relevant evidence... . This is a relative mat-

Broadly speaking, the questions about the abuse of consensus are twofold: (1) «What is the consensus view of Jesus' eschatological conception?», and (2) «What is it good for?» I discuss each question in a separate section. Other abuses, invoking other questions, I discuss incidentally in both sections.

Misrepresentations of Consensus

Forty years ago, Bultmann could write, «Today nobody doubts that Jesus' conception of the Kingdom of God is an eschatological one – at least in European theology and, as far as I can see, also among the American New Testament scholars.»³ Since then, the view has changed significantly – today one regularly meets doubts as to whether one or another eschatological concept in the gospels originated with Jesus. Robert Funk has enlisted and trained a small company of scholars in the art of publicly disowning the eschatological Jesus. (See below.) Yet it would be a mistake to think that the consensus which Bultmann observed has totally reversed its position. At most, we may only speak of a significant crumbling – not *tumbling* – of the old consensus. As M. Eugene Boring writes, «It is incorrect to assume a new non-eschatological consensus, or even the dissolution of an older consensus.»⁴

Funk lists a scholarly coming-to-consensus as a foundational goal of the Jesus Seminar. Pursuant to this goal, he describes the meetings as forums for *negotiating* (!) the members' views of Jesus.⁵ I can scarcely think of a less fruitful way of contributing to our understanding of the historical Jesus. A careful reading of the literature of the Jesus Seminar uncovers a number of methodological abuses. The correctives to these abuses culminate in a broad judgment against any sort of appeal to consensus, and perhaps to the programmatic pursuit of consensus as well.

If the issues surrounding the proper use of consensus seem more pressing now than ever, this is largely because of the Jesus Seminar. Certainly one of the most annoying aspects of the Seminar is the regularity with which its official publications, together with those of its more active members, misrepre-

ter, however, for if experts rather than laymen are disputing over a question in the field in which they themselves are experts, their appeal would be only to the facts and to reason, and any appeal of another expert would be completely without value as evidence» (Introduction to Logic, 4th ed., New York/London 1972, 80).

³ R. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, New York 1958, 13 (from a 1951 lecture).

⁴ The «Third Quest» and the Apostolic Faith, *Interpretation* 50 (1996) 341-54 (344-45). Scholarly opinion on the question of «Jesus and the imminent eschaton» is more or less still as varied as when W.G. Kümmel wrote his essay on «Eschatological Expectation in the Proclamation of Jesus» (in: *The Future of Our Religious Past*, FS R. Bultmann, New York 1971, 29-48).

⁵ R.W. Funk, *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millenium*, San Francisco 1996, 7-9.

sent the state of scholarship in the way of a pretended hegemony of its own views. The Seminar's *The Five Gospels* refers to the «liberation of the non-eschatological Jesus of the aphorisms and parables from Schweitzer's eschatological Jesus» as a «pillar of contemporary scholarship.»⁶ As anyone who regularly reads academic journals and attends the larger academic meetings knows, the claim that a non-eschatological understanding of Jesus is a pillar of scholarship simply has no basis in fact.

The activity of the Jesus Seminar provides some outstanding examples of the sort of methodological abuse to which I am calling attention. Seminar member James Butts reports on the polling results of the Seminar's gathering at the University of Notre Dame in October 1986. He writes that thirty of the thirty-nine members attending this meeting «doubted that Jesus expected the end of the world in his lifetime or the lifetime of his contemporaries.»⁷ In spelling out what this means for the direction of scholarship as a whole, Butts inscribes into the protasis of his generalizing claim (quoted below) the question that is writ large over the scholarly guild's reception of the Jesus Seminar, *viz.* the question of the Seminar's representativeness. Butts comments,

«If the position of these thirty scholars is at all representative of trends among biblical scholars generally, then a significant shift in scholarly understandings of Jesus is occurring. The view of Jesus as the proclaimer of the eschatological kingdom of God is no longer as dominant as it once was. The eschatological kingdom of Jesus' proclamation is disappearing. Not surprisingly, the voting at Notre Dame on the kingdom sayings reflects this loss of the eschatological Jesus.»⁸

Few of Butts's colleagues in the Seminar concede the possibility that the Seminar does not represent scholarship in general. Unfortunately, Butts's openness to this possibility, inscribed in the if-clause in the above quotation, turns out only to be pretended. In this regard, the words «Not surprisingly, the voting ... reflects this loss of the eschatological Jesus» are rather revealing, for from them we see that Butts's if-clause is only rhetorical deadwood. If he really holds the Seminar's representativeness to be an open question, then what aspect of the «loss of the eschatological Jesus» can he consider to be a *reflection* of scholarship in general? Reflections beam from known quantities, not open questions. A circle appears: Butts *infers* from the Seminar polling that «a significant shift in scholarly understandings ... is occurring», *and* reports it

⁶ R.W. Funk and R.W. Hoover, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, New York 1993, 4. The fifth gospel is the *Gospel of Thomas*.

⁷ J.R. Butts, *Probing the Polling: Jesus Seminar Results on the Kingdom Sayings*, *Facets and Foundations Forum* 3/1 (1987) 98-128 (110).

⁸ Butts, «Probing the Polling,» 110-11. B.A. Pearson has demonstrated that even the 18% of the sayings which the Jesus Seminar judges to be authentic (final results, see Funk and Hoover, *The Five Gospels*) are eschatological: «The fact is that eschatology is there, too, willy-nilly, and it requires a hermeneutical juggling act of considerable dexterity to remove it» (*The Gospel According to the Jesus Seminar*, *Religion* 25 [1995] 317-38 [330]).

as *unsurprising* that the Jesus Seminar dismisses the eschatological Jesus, since this «reflects» the state of scholarship.⁹ But how can one simultaneously infer general opinion from a given polling *and* marvel at that polling's accuracy in reflecting that *self*-inferred general opinion?¹⁰

Where Does a Consensus Get Us?

There are still more dangers to call attention to in this business of naming a consensus. Particular care must be taken when appealing to the fallen state of an old consensus as a term in an argument, as the appeal to the changing shape of scholarly opinion sometimes displays a remarkable power to deconstruct whatever argument it is called upon to serve. In a recent article, Stephen Patterson asserts that the non-eschatological Jesus is quickly becoming the dominant view.¹¹ As noted above, this assertion is subject to debate, but another aspect of his supporting argument weighs more heavily on the issues surrounding the role of a consensus. Patterson essentially revives and updates Albert Schweitzer's argument that the *opinio communis* on the historical Jesus is largely a reflection of contemporary sensibilities. He contends that, throughout this century and the last, the way that scholars have decided the question of Jesus' stance on apocalyptic expectations owes in no small measure to the fortunes of war – actual and threatened – and to rising and falling nationalist trends: «In the midst of the cultural optimism of 1892, Weiss's apocalyptic Jesus was a scandal; in the atmosphere of cultural pessimism that was just beginning to come to expression in 1906, this apocalyptic Jesus was just what the doctor ordered.»¹² By a corresponding gesture, Patterson accounts

⁹ Pearson has shown how much artifice lies behind the Jesus Seminar's claims about scholarship's devotion to a de-eschatologized Jesus. To the Seminar's claim that «Slowly and surely the evidence [about Jesus] began to erode» the Weiss-Schweitzer view (Funk and Hoover, *The Five Gospels*, 3), Pearson responds, «The «evidence» leading to the «erosion» of the eschatological Jesus paradigm is not cited, for the very good reason that it does not exist! On the contrary, all of the real evidence that has come to light since Weiss and Schweitzer – the massive evidence now available in the Dead Sea Scrolls is probably the most important – only serves to confirm the fact that the apocalyptic worldview was pervasive in 1st-century Jewish Palestine. And this evidence is of direct relevance to the study of the historical Jesus» (*The Gospel According to the Jesus Seminar*, 323).

¹⁰ Butts remarks in a footnote, «It is interesting that many of the most recent college and university «introductions» to the New Testament continue to employ this same eschatological model for describing the historical Jesus» (*Probing the Polling*, 111 n. 35). Butts apparently recognizes, therefore, that cross-sectional views of scholarship must not be located haphazardly if they are to be considered representative.

¹¹ S.J. Patterson, *The End of Apocalypse: Rethinking the Eschatological Jesus*, *Today* 52 (1995) 29-48. This essay is now a chapter in *idem*, *The God of Jesus: The Historical Jesus and the Search for Meaning*, Harrisburg 1998.

¹² Patterson, *The End of Apocalypse*, 32.

for widespread belief in the apocalyptic Jesus thesis at the time at which Bultmann wrote, «nobody doubts that Jesus' conception of the Kingdom of God is an eschatological one» (as quoted above; published in 1958, lectured in 1951):

«[B]y the 1950s, the cultural pessimism that began with the political collapse of Europe and the catastrophe of two World Wars eventually began to wash up onto the victorious, self-confident, can-do shores of North America as well, as we faced the psychologically debilitating realities of the Cold War, the threat of nuclear or environmental disaster, and the social upheaval of the 1960s. We too began to experience the cultural malaise that had held its grip on Europe for the first half of the century... . Is it any wonder that, as in European theology during the first half of this century, so also in North America since the 1950s the optimistic strains of the social gospel and its liberal Jesus have gradually given way to the assumption that Jesus preached an apocalyptic eschatology.»¹³

Patterson's point, like Schweitzer's, is simple: the closest to which earlier generations of scholars have come to the historical Jesus is an image refracted through scholarship's culturally-conditioned persona. Patterson's brief history of scholarship is fair – if his account of the «history of confidence» is a bit exaggerated, it at least goes for good effect – and his point is forceful. But something is wrong. Patterson does not seem to realize that, in arguing that scholarship's changing consensus about Jesus has meant little for a proper understanding of who Jesus really was, he has brilliantly deconstructed the central premise of the Jesus Seminar's polling activity, *viz.* the notion that the phenomenon of consensus possesses critical value. He essentially argues that the scholar's historical situatedness has had an overwhelmingly deleterious effect upon his or her attempts to get at the historical Jesus, and then winks at this conclusion through his professed faith in the Jesus Seminar. Who, we might ask, has lifted the veil from scholarship's eyes that an experiment like a «Jesus Seminar» might proceed unencumbered by cultural forces?¹⁴ A Schweitzerian critique of the various Jesus quests is the last thing one expects from an active Seminar member. The Seminar's methodology is as much opposed to Schweitzer's devaluation of consensus as its views are opposed to Schweitzer's apocalyptic Jesus.

Patterson simultaneously overturns past consensuses (i.e., those with which he disagrees) by blaming them on the prevailing *Zeitgeist*, and implies by his active participation in the Jesus Seminar the principle that polling scholars about Jesus is meaningful for Jesus research. To show a pattern of failure does not necessarily spell final disaster for a task, but it does bankrupt the notion that consentient opinion should lead to successful accomplishment of the

¹³ Patterson, *The End of Apocalypse*, 33-34.

¹⁴ Cf. G. Theissen and A. Merz's judgment: «The «non-eschatological Jesus» seems to have more Californian than Galilean local colouring» (*The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*, Minneapolis 1998, 11).

task. Patterson does not mistake the Schweitzerian critique for a radical distrust in the tools of historical criticism, but to relate the history of scholarship on the historical Jesus to the history of cultural forces, as both Schweitzer and Patterson have done, is to call a moratorium on invoking consensus as a meaningful phenomenon for the historian.

Patterson is not the only scholar who has tried to score points by demonstrating scholarship's history of failure, only to score more points for the opposing view by arguing in a way that unwarrantedly supposes some particular group or figure to be above failing in the same way. Patterson excludes the Jesus Seminar from his universalized failure, while Burton Mack excludes Jesus himself.

Mack, in arguing against the eschatological Jesus thesis, seeks to problematize the «both/and» underlying the gospel portrait of Jesus as *both* itinerant preacher *and* apocalypticist. «It puts the critical thinker in a double bind», he claims, «to recognize Mark's apocalyptic projections as mythology, yet retain the apocalyptic hypothesis with regard to Christian origins.»¹⁵ There are two obvious problems with Mack's argument: (1) he never establishes that the «conundrum» is real. The tension between «present» and «future» never actually resounds in contradiction, even if the exact way to account for this double aspect has occupied many minds. (2) Even if the conundrum *were* real, that would not mean that it was ever recognized as such. Two-dimensional thinking is not a logical problem, and it is even less of a historical problem.¹⁶ In fact – and herein lies his attempted double-slip – Mack himself argues my point when he remarks about how completely the supposed conundrum of an

¹⁵ B.L. Mack, *The Kingdom Sayings in Mark*, *Foundations and Facets Forum* 3/1 (1987) 3-47 (8).

¹⁶ Mack's oil-and-water separation of wisdom and apocalyptic is notorious. N.T. Wright writes, «the vital split between «prophetic» and «wisdom» traditions, or between «apocalyptic» and «sapiential» sayings, is warranted by nothing stronger than frequent repetition in certain limited scholarly circles» (*Jesus and the Victory of God*, Minneapolis 1996, 40). See also H. von Lips, *Christus als Sophia? Weisheitliche Traditionen in der urchristlichen Christologie*, in: *Anfänge der Christologie*, FS F. Hahn, Göttingen 1991, 75-95 (83-84); G.W.E. Nickelsburg, *Wisdom and Apocalypticism in Early Judaism: Some Points for Discussion*, SBLSP 1994, 715-32; and J.J. Collins, *Seers, Sibyls, and Sages in Hellenistic-Roman Judaism*, Leiden 1997, 385-404.

The book of Zechariah is a case in point of the compatibility of wisdom and apocalyptic. R.G. Hamerton-Kelly argues that Zechariah embodies a comparable «both/and» in the form of a «theological stalemate between the theocrats and the eschatologists» (*The Temple and the Origins of Jewish Apocalyptic*, VT 20 [1970] 1-15 [14]), while S.L. Cook goes even farther and questions the adversarial scenario conjured up by Hamerton-Kelly's «stalemate,» since «a theocrat may also have an apocalyptic worldview» (*Prophecy and Apocalypticism: The Postexilic Social Setting*, Minneapolis 1995, 153 n. 114. See also K. Koch, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic*, Naperville 1972, 127).

apocalyptic Jesus has escaped notice.¹⁷ He finds the conundrumical «both/and» hidden in Dodd's, Schweitzer's, Bultmann's, and the post-Bultmannian interpretations of Jesus' message:

«Realized eschatology» was C.H. Dodd's clever solution to the conundrum of an apocalypse in the present. He was not the only scholar to exercise his genius on the contradiction inherent in the apocalyptic hypothesis, however. The list includes Albert Schweitzer's «spirit» of Jesus, Rudolf Bultmann's «radical obedience,» the spate of existentialist hermeneutics applied to the Jesus traditions, and the comfort found in paradox, the irrational, and the mysterious that is characteristic of continental views on Jesus and the origins of Christianity. If parable theory in recent American scholarship were added to this list, every major hermeneutical «event» in this century could be viewed as a proposal for solving the single and singularly intransigent riddle of an apocalyptic Jesus... . Thus the «eschatological» phenomenon may be imagined now in terms of person, now event, now «world,» now language, and so forth, without questioning the terms of the underlying issue common to all.»¹⁸

Mack's discussion begs a question: If the unconsciously-held «both/and» represents the norm for NT theology from Mark until the present day, as Mack seeks to demonstrate, why could it not also be the norm *before* Mark? If nearly every interpreter since the earliest Jesus movement is so demonstrably double in his/her thinking, the burden of proof falls upon Mack to show why we should expect differently for Jesus' earliest followers, and for Jesus himself.¹⁹ In fact, Mack does not account for why wisdom and apocalyptic should be incompatible bedfellows in the historical Jesus' message, but *not* in the synoptic evangelists' portrait of Jesus.²⁰ The so-called conundrum lacks both logical and historical force. By demonstrating the prevalence of this double aspect, Mack has in effect deconstructed his own claims about what «puts the critical thinker in a double bind.»²¹ By itself, Mack's call to replace

¹⁷ The Jesus Seminar goes nearly as far as Mack in separating sage and apocalypticist. A.J. Hultgren agrees with the Seminar's portrait of Jesus as a sage, but rightly continues, «we need not, on those grounds, dispense with him as an eschatological prophet of the kingdom as well» (The Jesus Seminar and the Third Quest, *Pro Ecclesia* 3 [1994] 266-70 [270]).

¹⁸ The Kingdom Sayings in Mark, 9.

¹⁹ See D.C. Allison, Jr., A Plea for Thoroughgoing Eschatology, *JBL* 113 (1994) 651-68 (665).

²⁰ Bultmann notes this same unevenness in the small amount of admixture that scholars sometimes permit to Jesus, on the one hand, and the more generous admixture they permit (by default) to the evangelists, on the other: if the evangelists added the eschatological material in the gospels, then «the meaning of the eschatological message would still be fundamentally the same, and the question would still remain whether and how this message and the preaching of the will of God were combined into a unity in the early church. Instead of the preaching of Jesus the preaching of the early church would call for explanation ...» (R. Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, New York 1934, 123).

²¹ In his attack on Schweitzer's eschatologizing interpretation of Jesus, J.M. Robinson commits the same error of holding early Christians to a higher level of consistent thinking than exhibited by modern scholars: he argues that Schweitzer's derivation of an eschatolo-

the historical hermeneutic of «both/and» with a hermeneutic of an «either/or» is already counter-intuitive,²² but in writing the history of scholarship's failure to adopt an «either/or» hermeneutic, he further grounds the results of intuition in a historical pattern. Was the historical Jesus above answering to historical patterns? As Richard Hays remarks, «Only flat-footed rationalists could deem it impossible for both the present and future Kingdom sayings to be held in Jesus' mind at the same time.»²³ Some seventy years ago, Henry J. Cadbury wrote that separating ethical teaching from eschatology was «an assumption of logical consistency which human experience will promptly deny.»²⁴ Mack's heavy-handed social-scientific method leaves no room,²⁵ e.g., for the authors of the Wisdom of Solomon, the *Testaments of the Twelve Pa-*

gical Jesus from Mark implies that Mark devalues history in a way that calls into question the gospel's historicity, thus questioning its value as a witness for Schweitzer. According to Robinson, Schweitzer must surrender either his eschatological Jesus or his «historicizing interpretation of the Gospels»: «by tracing the eschatological element of the [Markan] narrative back to Jesus himself, [Schweitzer] eliminated from the history of early Christianity the necessity for any period when Jesus was «still» looked upon from an objective, immanent point of view» (The Problem of History in Mark and Other Marcan Studies, Philadelphia 1982, 57). But if combining history with eschatology is really inconsistent, why should the inconsistency, in this case, be attributed to Schweitzer? After all, the inconsistency could be Mark's. Robinson's observation is therefore equivocal, at best: we could equally infer from it the already likely prospect that the gospel writers were no more consistent in ordering their private thoughtworlds than we moderns are in ordering ours, and that widespread acceptance of an eschatological message did not spell the end for the Church's interest in the historical Jesus. One wonders if Robinson's thorough linguisticizing of eschatology is not derived from Bultmann's comments on the Fourth Gospel (see R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, London 1955, 2:127). See N. Dahl's response to Bultmann's attempt to put a philosophical straitjacket on historically-bound thinkers (Rudolf Bultmann's *Theology of the New Testament*, in: *The Crucified Messiah and Other Essays*, Minneapolis 1974, 90-128 [126]).

²² Wright refers to this dichotomizing tendency in Mack's work as «the easy either/or that has dominated so much of the Jesus Seminar's work» (Jesus and the Victory of God, 36 n. 29).

²³ R.B. Hays, *The Corrected Jesus*, *First Things* 43 (1994) 43-48 (46).

²⁴ *The Making of Luke-Acts*, New York 1927, 283. As Cadbury writes (p. 284), «incompatibility of eschatology and ethics is probably a difficulty that only moderns would feel.»

²⁵ P. Fredriksen correctly notes, «method has so controlled historical reconstruction that ... nonconforming data simply disappear... . [W]e can never let the method control the evidence» (What You See is What You Get: Context and Content in Current Research on the Historical Jesus, *TToday* 52 [1995] 75-97 [97]). In another connection, but as a general observation, L.T. Johnson warns that «Mack does not go to the trouble to consider the evidence» (*Religious Experience in Earliest Christianity: A Missing Dimension in New Testament Studies*, Minneapolis 1998, 161 n. 95).

triarchs, *IV Ezra*, the Gospel of Matthew, the *Didache*, and the *Shepherd of Hermas*,²⁶ and, especially, the recently published 4QInstruction.

Of course, some people *are* free of otherwise universal failures, but my point is that Patterson and Mack both argue in a way that shifts the burden of proof onto anyone supposing a particular group's or figure's freedom from a purported failure, and then make this supposition themselves in the constructive stages of their respective arguments. Each springs his own trap. By his participation in the Jesus Seminar, Patterson implicitly admits approval of a critical use of the phenomenon of consensus, a use which he had deconstructed in the course of a history-of-scholarship preface. Mack writes a history of scholarship's universal failure to make a (supposed) logical or ideational connection, and then supposes this same unexampled connection to be a patent feature of the thinking of the early Christians.

This article is not primarily a review of the Jesus Seminar, but any discussion about the role of consensus in NT studies today will necessarily lead in that direction, since naming a consensus is a focus of that group. It needs to be pointed out, however, that these abuses also appear (albeit less frequently) in the work of scholars unconnected with the Seminar. In fact, the argumentational use of consensus even appears in the work of the Seminar's detractors. For example, while Hays makes several good points in his review of the Jesus Seminar, he unfortunately places more unqualified faith in the distribution of scholarly opinion than does the Seminar. According to Hays, the fact that none of the Seminar members is on the faculty of Duke, Chicago, or an Ivy League school (a fact that is no longer true) weighs against the views of the Seminar. One wonders how many of the Seminar members must be hired by Yale and Harvard before Hays will agree with the Seminar's views.²⁷

Honest to the Public: The Ethics of Scholarship

While the present article is aimed at some of the logical misuses of the phenomenon of consensus, I would be remiss not to mention the ethical dimension of the Jesus Seminar's false claims to represent the state of scholarship. These comments are all the more timely in light of the provocative title of Funk's book, *Honest to Jesus*.

Because the Seminar publishes the results of its polling in a popularizing format, aimed at the uninitiated public, its failure to allude to its non-representativeness in matters of historical Jesus research can hardly ward off suspi-

²⁶ The first six works are cited as examples of the compatibility of wisdom and apocalyptic in C.E. Carlston, *Wisdom and Eschatology in Q*, in: *Logia: Les Paroles de Jésus – The Sayings of Jesus*, Leuven 1982, 101-19.

²⁷ Hays, *The Corrected Jesus*, 46.

cions about its true agenda. The Seminar never informs the public that its views may not be concentric with the views of scholarship in general. In *The Five Gospels*, a book aimed at the general public,²⁸ the reader is told that scholars (implying a clear majority) agree on the set of premises which guide the Seminar's work. For many of the Seminar's premises, the claim to universality is more than dubious. And while the Seminar readily admits to the public that it is «controversial», it does so in a veiled manner: it lets the reader assume that the alluded controversy is that surrounding the Seminar's sometimes cool reception in the church, rather than that surrounding its reception in the academy. The questionable tactics of the Seminar's public mission have precipitated a backlash.²⁹ For the Seminar to claim to represent a consensus in reporting to a guild that knows better would be one thing. For it to make this claim in books aimed at the public is something altogether different.

A further problem with the Jesus Seminar's publication of its results in a popular format surrounds the meaning it attaches to the four colors. Marcus Borg explains the meaning of these colors in two unequal schemes: (1) «A saying printed in red signifies the voice of Jesus, pink is the voice of Jesus beginning to be shaped by the community, gray may contain an echo of the voice of Jesus but is more the voice of the community, and black is completely the voice of the community», and (2) «In colloquial language, red will mean <That's Jesus!>; pink, <Sure sounds like him>; gray, <Well, maybe>; and black, <There's been some mistake.>»³⁰ Which is the correct key for unlocking the meaning of the four colors? A reader who interprets a gray saying according to the community-interference scheme will be compelled to conduct a stratigraphic analysis in order to find the authentic Jesus, while a reader interpreting the same saying according to the «colloquial language» scheme will be compelled to move on to the next saying in order to find the authentic Jesus. To impose some sort of equivalence between the two interpretive schemes, as if the difference between the precise notions of *ipsissima verba* and *ipsissima vox* is strictly a function of the probabilistic nature of the scholar's judgment,

²⁸ That is, in the Seminar's words, «a broad public not familiar with the history of critical scholarship over the past two centuries and more» (Funk and Hoover, *The Five Gospels*, 35).

²⁹ Unfortunately, one of the more acclaimed titles in the backlash is also guilty of exploiting the public's disadvantage: L.T. Johnson's *The Real Jesus* (San Francisco 1996) begins as a promising review of the Jesus Seminar, but then turns into an unsubstantiated appeal for neo-Barthianism. Johnson glibly labels the Jesus of canonical-linguistic experientialism as the «real» Jesus, but supports his claim with nothing more than a purely moral-suasive argument. In all, the Seminar has a more convincing philosophy of the «real» than Johnson does.

³⁰ Jesus in Four Colors, *BibRev* 9/6 (Dec. 1993) 10, 62 (10). The latter scheme is listed in *The Five Gospels* (36-37; with one word change) as an «unofficial but helpful interpretation of the colors.»

creates considerable problems. To begin with, one can readily see how bogus the voting record of the Seminar would be if both interpretive schemes circulated in the rooms where the polling was done. (*The Five Gospels* attests that this state of affairs was actually the case!)³¹ One vote of «That's Jesus!» and two votes of «There's been some mistake» do not average out to «an echo of the voice of Jesus.» Furthermore, the imposed equivalence also stacks the cards against those topics of authentic Jesus discourse to which the Church was quick to attach its own interpretation.³² This last point basically charges that the criterion of dissimilarity, with its well-known skewing of results, is still very much present in the methodology of the Seminar (albeit unconsciously!) in its most base, counterintuitive form, despite the Seminar's insistence to have refined the criterion of dissimilarity into a more intuitive form.

Funk is correct to caution against the subjectiveness of «theological commitment,»³³ but power politics and imposed time constraints pose an even greater obstacle for the quest of the historical Jesus. Scholarship is, in fact, very far from a consensus about the historical Jesus. One hopes that this lack of consensus is a sign of the healthy development of that question.³⁴ (On difficult questions, *having something to say* and *speaking the truth* can be opposing energies.) When (and if) a true consensus *is* reached, let us hope that it is born from the full gestation of scholarly pursuits, and not from prematurely induced labor.

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³¹ Funk and Hoover, *The Five Gospels*, 36.

³² Accordingly, the color scheme is a better reflection of *how* the Church added its interpretation to the text, than *when* it did so. E.g., a parable and an aphorism, both showing signs of having been reinterpreted by the Church, do not have equal chances of catching the color-discriminating eye, since the Church presumably altered most of the parables only by attaching an interpretation at the end, so that much remains to be displayed in red, but altered the aphorisms in a more integrated manner, so that only black and gray apply.

³³ *Honest to Jesus*, 8.

³⁴ This is in hope that the «creativity» behind the Third Quest is «chaotic» only in its results, and not in its genius. See J.H. Charlesworth, *Jesus Research Expands with Chaotic Creativity*, in: *Images of Jesus Today*, Valley Forge 1994, 1-41. See also D.C. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet*, Minneapolis 1998, 12.