Meeting Jesus Again
for the First Time

THE HISTORICAL JESUS & THE
HEART OF CONTEMPORARY FAITH

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images of the Christian life, between how we think of Jesus and how we think of the Christian life. Our image of Jesus affects our perception of the Christian life in two ways: it gives shape to the Christian life; and (as we shall see later in this chapter) it can make Christianity credible or incredible.

The way images of Jesus give shape to the Christian life is illustrated by two widespread images and their effects on images of the Christian life. The most common image of Jesus—what I call the “popular image”—sees him as the divine savior. Put most compactly, this image is a constellation of answers to the three classic questions about Jesus. Who was he? The divinely begotten Son of God. What was his mission or purpose? To die for the sins of the world. What was his message? Most centrally, it was about himself: his own identity as the Son of God, the saving purpose of his death, and the importance of believing in him.

The image of the Christian life to which this image of Jesus leads is clear: it consists primarily of believing—that Jesus was who he said he was and that he died for our sins. We may call this a fideistic image of the Christian life, one whose primary dynamic is faith, understood as believing certain things about Jesus to be true. Though belief may (and ideally does) lead to much else, it is the primary quality of this image of the Christian life.

Only slightly less common is an image of Jesus as teacher. A de-dogmatized image of Jesus, it is held by those who are not sure what to make of the doctrinal claims made about Jesus by the Christian tradition. When these are set aside, what remains is Jesus as a great teacher. His moral teaching may be understood in quite general terms (the Great Commandment of love of God and love of neighbor, or the Golden Rule of doing to others as you would have them do to you), or in quite specific terms as a fairly narrow code of righteousness. But in either case, the image of the Christian life that flows out of this image of Jesus consists of “being good,” of seeking to live as Jesus said we should.

Just as the first image of Jesus leads to a fideistic image of the Christian life, so this image leads to a monistic image of the Christian life. Both images, it seems to me, are inadequate. Not only are they inaccurate as images of the historical Jesus, as we shall see, but they lead to incomplete images of the Christian life. That life is ultimately not about believing or about being good.

Rather, as I shall claim, it is about a relationship with God that involves us in a journey of transformation.

The understanding of the Christian life as a journey of transformation is grounded in the alternative image of Jesus that I develop in this book. This image flows out of contemporary biblical and historical scholarship. Though it may seem fresh and initially unfamiliar, it is very old, going back to the first century of the early Christian movement. Meeting this Jesus will, for many of us, be like meeting Jesus again for the first time.

MEETING JESUS AGAIN:
MY OWN STORY.

To recall the ways in which we have met Jesus before is illuminating. The occasion for my first doing so came unexpectedly. About two years ago I was invited to speak to an Episcopal men’s group that had been meeting weekly for over ten years. Because of the nature of the group, whose times together were marked by personal sharing, their instructions to me were twofold: “Talk to us about Jesus, and make it personal.”

Nobody had ever asked me to do that before. I had given hundreds of lectures about Jesus, but nobody had ever said, “Make it personal.” It was a challenge. Not being sure how to proceed, I wrote the words Me and Jesus on a piece of paper, began to think about them, and was led into memories and reflections about Jesus in my own life. It was a rich and illuminating experience, and I encourage you to try this yourself sometime. Simply begin, as I did, with your earliest childhood memories of Jesus, track them through adolescence and into adulthood, and then see what has happened to your image of Jesus over the years.

Childhood

I grew up in a small town in North Dakota near the Canadian border in the 1940s, in a world that now seems very far away. We were a Scandinavian Lutheran family, and church was important to us. Not only did I have several uncles who were Lutheran pastors, but the local Lutheran church was the center of our social
life: Sunday-morning services and Sunday school, Ladies’ Aid meetings that I attended with my mom, frequent church suppers, midweek services during Lent, missionary conferences, and youth groups with names like “Lutheran Children of the Reformation.”

My early memories of Jesus are quite scattered. I remember pictures of Jesus with sheep, and with children. I knew he liked children; that was a big message when we were kids. Clearly, he was important. I knew that he was God’s son, and that he had been born in a miraculous way. Indeed, I knew that he was “born of the virgin Mary” before I knew what a virgin was. My father’s voice reading the birth story from Luke’s gospel to my family as we sat around the Christmas tree on Christmas Eve comes back to me still: “And it came to pass in those days that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.”

I also knew that Jesus died on a cross and then rose from the dead, and that all of this was very important. Easter mornings ranked second only to Christmas as festive times of the year. I knew you could pray to Jesus and even ask him to be present: “Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest” was our daily table grace. As a preschooler I memorized John 3:16 for a Sunday-school Christmas program:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

The verse seemed impossibly long at the time.

And then, as the hymns of my childhood began to come back, the memories became more emotionally charged. Recalling their melodies and words moved me greatly as I sat at my desk with the words Me and Jesus staring up at me. As I began to say the words out loud, I found that I could not do so without my voice breaking.

Three hymns in particular came back as favorites from those early years. The first we sang often in youth group as well as in church services:

Jesus, priceless treasure, source of purest pleasure, dearest to me.
Ah, how long I’ve panted, and my heart hath fainted, thirsting, Lord, for Thee.
Thine I am, O spotless lamb; I will suffer nought to hide Thee, Nought I ask besides Thee.

In like manner a second combined praise and devotion:

Beautiful Savior, King of Creation,
Son of God and Son of man!
Truly I’d love Thee, truly I’d serve Thee,
Light of my soul, my joy, my crown.

The third is associated with a particular memory, a missionary conference at a rural Lutheran church a few miles from our town church. I was probably about six. It was a warm Sunday afternoon in June, and I can remember playing with the unfamiliar country kids in the churchyard before the service began. The speakers were a missionary couple from China. I do not remember what they said, but I’m sure they spoke about the importance and challenges of the mission field. Then we sang that great Christian missionary hymn “O Zion, Haste, Thy Mission High Fulfilling.” I can vividly remember sitting next to my parents in that white frame country church, my body still warm and sweaty from play, and how the sunlight looked as the sanctuary filled with the sound of our voices:

O Zion, haste, thy mission high fulfilling,
To tell to all the world that God is light;
That He who made all nations is not willing,
One soul should perish, lost in shades of night.
Publish glad tidings, tidings of peace,
Tidings of Jesus, redemption and release.

It was clear to me in that moment that believing in Jesus, and telling others of the tidings of Jesus, were the most important things in the world. What was at stake was nothing less than souls perishing, lost in shades of night.
Adolescence

In my early teens, I began to have doubts about the existence of God. It was an experience filled with anxiety, guilt, and fear. I still believed enough to be afraid of going to hell because of my doubts. I felt that they were wrong, and in my prayers I would ask for forgiveness. But I couldn’t stop doubting, and so my requests for forgiveness seemed to me not to be genuine. After all, I had learned that true repentance included the resolution not to continue committing the sin.

Every night for several years, I prayed with considerable anguish, “Lord, I believe. Help thou my unbelief.” The inability to overcome my doubt confirmed for me that I had become more of an unbeliever than a believer. In retrospect, I can also see that, for me at least, belief is not a matter of the will. I desperately wanted to believe and to be delivered from the anguish I was experiencing. If I could have made myself believe, I would have.

Unlike my earlier perplexity about God’s “everywhere-ness,” my doubt about God’s existence was not connected to any particular element in my belief system, but concerned the foundation of the system itself. I now understand what was happening: I was experiencing a collision between the modern worldview and my childhood beliefs. The modern worldview, with its image of what is real as the world of matter and energy and its vision of the universe as a closed system of cause and effect, made belief in God—a nonmaterial reality—increasingly problematic. I had entered the stage of critical thinking, and there was no way back.

And, of course, these doubts about God affected how I thought of Jesus. What does it mean to speak of Jesus as the Son of God when one is no longer sure that God is?

College

As adolescence ended, I went off to a Lutheran college in the Midwest with a conventional but no longer deeply held understanding of the Christian faith. The nightly prayers for belief stopped. Apparently I no longer believed enough to be frightened of hell. The fear and guilt had been reduced to a perplexity
that I would occasionally, but not often, think about. Other matters caught my attention.

Then in my junior year, in a required religion course, I was exposed to the scholarly study of theology by a brilliant young professor with a fresh Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. Intellectual, it was the most exciting material I had ever encountered. The course covered all the big questions: God, the nature of reality, human nature, evil, atonement, ethics, the relationship between Christianity and other religions, and so forth. It exposed me to the diversity of answers provided by the intellectual giants of the tradition, ancient and modern: Augustine, Aquinas, Anselm, Schleiermacher, Barth, Bultmann, Tillich, Eliade, and so on. The experience was fascinating and liberating. Its effect on me was that the sacred cows of inherited belief began to fall in a way that legitimated their demise. But it didn't help me to believe. Rather, it provided a framework within which I could take my perplexity seriously.

Judging from later conversations with many Christians, I think my journey as described thus far is fairly typical. As college ended, the images of Christianity and of Jesus that I had received as a child were no longer persuasive or compelling. I had become aware that it was difficult and perhaps not necessary to take the Bible and Christian teachings literally, but I didn't know what a nonliteral approach might mean. My childhood understanding of Christianity had collapsed, but nothing had replaced it. I had become a "closet agnostic," someone who didn't know what to make of it all.

Seminary and Beyond

And so I went off to seminary. That didn't help. To put it more precisely, that didn't help the faith dimension of my journey, which was still years away from resolution. But seminary was tremendously illuminating; the insights flowing from theological education are immensely helpful in sorting out what it means to take the Christian life seriously.

Jesus once again moved center stage. This happened because of my first-semester New Testament course. There I learned that the image of Jesus from my childhood—the popular image of Jesus as the divine savior who knew himself to be the Son of God and who offered up his life for the sins of the world—was not historically true. That, I learned, was not what the historical Jesus was like.

The basis for this mind-boggling realization was the understanding of the gospels that has developed over the last two hundred years of biblical scholarship. I learned that the gospels are neither divine documents nor straightforward historical records. They are not divine products inspired directly by God, whose contents therefore are to be believed (as I had thought prior to this). Nor are they eyewitness accounts written by people who had accompanied Jesus and simply sought to report what they had seen and heard.

Rather, I learned, the gospels represent the developing traditions of the early Christian movement. Written in the last third of the first century, they contain the accumulated traditions of early Christian communities and were put into their present forms by second- (or even third-) generation authors. Through careful comparative study of the gospels, one can see these authors at work, modifying and adding to the traditions they received. They were continuing a process that had been going on throughout the forty to seventy years when the gospel material circulated in oral form. Much happened in those decades to change the traditions about Jesus.

It is not so much that memories grew dim, or that the oral tradition was unreliable. Rather, two primary factors were at work. First, the traditions about Jesus were adapted and applied to the changing circumstances of the early Christian movement. Jesus himself spoke in a Palestinian Jewish milieu. The gospels were written in and for communities that had begun to move beyond Palestine and into the larger Mediterranean world, and the gospel writers adapted the materials about Jesus to these new settings. Second, the movement's beliefs about Jesus grew during those decades. We can see that growth by arranging the gospel material chronologically, from earlier to later writings. As the decades passed, the early Christian movement increasingly spoke of Jesus as divine and as having the qualities of God, a development that within a few centuries was to result in the doctrine of the Trinity.
The gospels are the products of communities experiencing these developments. As such, they contain not only the movement’s memories of the historical Jesus, but those memories added to and modified by the growing beliefs and changing circumstances of the movement. Thus the gospels are the church’s memories of the historical Jesus transformed by the community’s experience and reflection in the decades after Easter. They therefore tell us what these early Christian communities had come to believe about Jesus by the last third of the first century. They are not, first and foremost, reports of the ministry itself.

This understanding of the gospels is the basis for the well-known scholarly distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, which I also learned about in that first seminary course. The first phrase refers to Jesus as the particular person he was—Jesus of Nazareth, a Galilean Jew of the first century who was executed by the Romans. The second phrase refers to the Christ of the developing Christian tradition—namely, what Jesus became in the faith of the early Christian communities in the decades after his death.

It is the Christ of faith whom we encounter on the surface level of the gospels, as well as in the fully developed Christian creeds of the fourth and fifth centuries. That Jesus—the Christ of faith—is spoken of as divine, indeed coequal with God, of one substance with God, begotten before all worlds, the second person of the Trinity. I learned that Jesus as a human being—the historical Jesus—was quite different from all of that. For one thing, he would not have known any of those things about himself.

This was news. Before becoming aware of all of this, I had quite unreflectively combined what I heard about the Christ of faith with my image of Jesus as a historical figure. Though of course I had been aware that Jesus had lived a human life, I had also assumed that even as a human being he was the second person of the Trinity and would have known that about himself. Now, along with learning about the nature of the gospels as the developing tradition of the church, I learned that there was sharp discontinuity (rather than continuity) between the historical Jesus and the Christ of Christian tradition.

The understanding of John’s gospel that emerged in that first seminary course provides a good way of illustrating the combined effects of this new knowledge. The picture of Jesus in John is clearly quite different from the picture of Jesus in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which are collectively known as the synoptic gospels.

In John, Jesus speaks as a divine person. The great “I am” statements (“I am the bread of life,” “the light of the world,” “the vine, the way, the truth and the life,” and so on) are all peculiar to John. So are statements such as “I and the Father are one” and “He who has seen me has seen the Father.” In the synoptic gospels, Jesus speaks very differently; his message is not about himself or his identity. Like most Christians, I had simply harmonized these two different images, and indeed had not really been aware of how different they are. I had assumed that Jesus talked both as he does in John and as he does in the synoptic gospels.

Now I learned (and saw for myself) a different explanation. The contrast between the synoptic and Johannine images of Jesus is so great that one of them must be nonhistorical. Both cannot be accurate characterizations of Jesus as a historical figure. The verdict of nonhistorical went to John. I learned that the portrait of Jesus in John’s gospel was essentially one of the Christ of faith, and not the Jesus of history. Jesus never spoke of himself as the Son of God, as one with God, as the light of the world, as the way, the truth, and the life, and so forth. Indeed, he never spoke the words of John 3.16—that verse from my childhood that had summed up my image of Jesus.

I am aware that this is still news for some Christians, even though it has been old hat in the seminaries of mainline denominations throughout this century. It was news to me when I heard it, and its effect on my image of Jesus as divine savior—the popular image—was dramatic. I saw that this image was basically drawn from the later portions of the gospel tradition—largely from John’s gospel, supplemented by the birth stories in Matthew and Luke. Indeed, the linkage between John’s gospel and the popular image of Jesus was so strong that I remember becoming angry at John when I first became aware that its account was largely nonhistorical. I saw John as containing a distorted image of Jesus, an image I had spent years trying to believe in. I would have been happy to have John excised from the New Testament.
(I now see John very differently, and will say more about that shortly.)

Thus the cumulative effect of my first seminary New Testament course upon my image of Jesus was staggering. In addition, I learned of two further consensus positions then dominant in Jesus scholarship. The first was that we can’t know very much at all about the Jesus of history. Not only was John’s gospel seen as nonhistorical, but it was felt that even within the synoptic gospels it was very difficult to discern the voice of Jesus from the voice of the church. Midcentury Jesus scholarship was marked by thoroughgoing skepticism, coupled with the claim that only the Christ of faith is theologically significant.

The second consensus position concerned what little we could know about Jesus—namely, that he was an “eschatological prophet” who expected and proclaimed the end of the present world and the coming of the Kingdom of God in the very near future. That (and not his own identity or the importance of believing in him) was the content of his message and the basis of his urgent call to repent: the world was soon to pass away; therefore, ground yourself in God. About the nearness of the end he was, of course, wrong.

I must admit that it was not a very satisfying image of Jesus. Yet it was the image that a generation or two of seminary students received: we can’t know much about Jesus, and what we can know is that he was wrong about the central conviction animating his ministry and message, and in any case it doesn’t really matter, for the historical Jesus is theologically irrelevant.

As a twenty-two-year-old seminarian, I found all of this very exciting, though it also seemed vaguely scandalous and something I shouldn’t tell my mother about. The news that Jesus was very different from what we think he was like seemed an important piece of information. And it aroused my curiosity: if Jesus’ message wasn’t about himself as the Son of God whose purpose was to die for our sins, what was his message, and what was he up to?

In fact, curiosity is too weak a word. I had not planned to be a New Testament or Jesus scholar when I went to seminary (indeed, I had not even planned to go to seminary, but that’s another story). Nevertheless, I became captivated by the question of Jesus, and have been involved in the scholarly quest for the historical Jesus ever since.

But back to seminary and the years of graduate school that followed. Even as I was becoming fascinated with the study of the Christian tradition and the quest for the historical Jesus, my unbelief was deepening. The “closet agnostic” was becoming a “closet atheist,” though I never acknowledged that to anybody. The reasons are clear enough to me now. The central problem was still the collision between God and the modern worldview, between my image of God and the image of reality I had acquired by growing up in the modern world. The latter had hardened into a taken-for-granted “map” of reality. Indeed, I didn’t even think of it as a map, but simply as the way things are.

Moreover, the longer I studied the Christian tradition, the more transparent its human origins became. Religions in general (including Christianity), it seemed to me, were manifestly cultural products. I could see how their readily identifiable psychological and social functions served human needs and cultural ends. The notion that we made it all up was somewhat alarming, but also increasingly compelling.

And so, though I found the study of the Bible and the Christian tradition to be immensely rich and rewarding, the bottom line was that in the end I didn’t know what to do with the notion of God. On the whole, I thought that there probably was no such reality.

This uncertainty about God affected the focus of my research on Jesus. For about the first dozen years, I concentrated on what we can glimpse about Jesus’ relationship to “this world.” I focused on his involvement with the social and political issues of his day, especially his challenge to the purity system of the first-century Jewish social world. I argued that he was an advocate of the politics of compassion in a social world dominated by the politics of purity (about which I shall say more in a later chapter). In short, I studied those parts of the tradition that made sense apart from the God question. But even as I did this, I remained aware that Jesus was more than a sociopolitical figure, although I didn’t know what to make of what he said about God.
Then in my mid-thirties I had a number of experiences of what I now recognize as "nature mysticism." In a sense, they were nothing spectacular, at least not compared with the experiences described by William James in his classic work The Varieties of Religious Experience. But they fundamentally changed my understanding of God, Jesus, religion, and Christianity.

The experiences were marked by what the Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel called "radical amazement," moments of transformed perception in which the earth is seen as "filled with the glory of God," shining with a radiant presence. They were also moments of connectedness in which I felt my linkage to what is.

They seemed similar to the experiences that Rudolf Otto described as experiences of the "numinous," the awe-inspiring and wonder-evoking "holy," the mysterium tremendum et fascinans (the tremendous, overwhelming mystery that elicits trembling even as it also attracts us in a compelling way). They involved a rediscovery of mystery—not an intellectual paradox, but an experience of sacred mystery.

These experiences, besides being ecstatic, were for me aha moments. They gave me a new understanding of the meaning of the word God. I realized that God does not refer to a supernatural being "out there" (which is where I had put God ever since my childhood musings about God "up in heaven"). Rather, I began to see, the word God refers to the sacred at the center of existence, the holy mystery that is all around us and within us. God is the nonmaterial ground and source and presence in which to cite words attributed to Paul by the author of Acts, "we live and move and have our being".

Thus I began also to understand what it means to say that God is both everywhere present and "up in heaven"—both immanent and transcendent, as traditional Christian theology puts it. As immanent (the root means "to dwell within"), God is not somewhere else, but right here and everywhere. To speak of God as being "up in heaven"—that is, as transcendent—means that God is not to be identified with any particular thing, not even with the sum total of things.

God is more than everything, and yet everything is in God. Being a thinking type, I began studying experiences of God in both mystical and nonmystical forms. I learned that even though these experiences are extraordinary, they are also quite common, known across cultures, throughout history, and into the present time. Gradually it became obvious to me that God—the sacred, the holy, the numinous—was "real." God was no longer a concept or an article of belief, but had become an element of experience.

How I See Jesus Now

This transformation in my understanding of God began to affect my understanding of Jesus. I now was able to see the centrality of God (or "the Spirit," to say the same thing) in Jesus' own life. I began to see Jesus as one whose spirituality—his experiential awareness of Spirit—was foundational for his life. This perception became the vantage point for what I have since come to understand as the key truth about Jesus: that in addition to being deeply involved in the social world of the everyday, he was also grounded in the world of the Spirit. Indeed, as I shall observe from several perspectives in this book, Jesus' relationship to the Spirit was the source of everything that he was.

THE PRE-EASTER AND THE POST-EASTER JESUS

As I have continued my study of Jesus, the distinction between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith that I learned about in my first seminary course remains of first importance. There simply is a major difference between what Jesus was like as a figure of history and how he is spoken of in the gospels and later Christian tradition. However, I have begun to prefer using another set of phrases to express the contrast: the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Jesus. They seem more precise and illuminating.

By the pre-Easter Jesus, I mean, of course, Jesus as a figure of history before his death. Most of this book concerns the pre-Easter Jesus. Moreover, I shall provide a sketch of how I see the pre-Easter Jesus in the next chapter, so I shall not say more about him now.

I have come to prefer speaking of the post-Easter Jesus rather than the Christ of faith. The latter phrase always suggested to me
a rather problematic reality. The choice of words implied that the "real" Jesus was the Jesus of history, whereas the Christ of faith could only be believed in. The first could (at least in principle) be known; the second could be accepted only by faith.

For me, the phrase the post-Easter Jesus gets past that difficulty. I define the post-Easter Jesus as the Jesus of Christian tradition and experience. That is, the post-Easter Jesus is not just the product of early Christian belief and thought, but an element of experience.

Indeed, this seems to me to be the central meaning of Easter. Beginning with Easter, the early movement continued to experience Jesus as a living reality after his death, but in a radically new way. After Easter, his followers experienced him as a spiritual reality, no longer as a person of flesh and blood, limited in time and space, as Jesus of Nazareth had been. Rather, Jesus as the risen living Christ could be experienced anywhere and everywhere. Increasingly he was spoken of as having all of the qualities of God. Prayers were addressed to Jesus as God, and praise was offered to Jesus as God in Christian worship. In short, his early followers experienced the risen Christ and addressed the risen Christ as the functional equivalent of God, as "one with God."

So it has been ever since. The living risen Christ of the New Testament has been an experiential reality (and not just an article of belief) from the days of Easter to the present. Thus, in the experience, worship, and devotion of Christians throughout the centuries, the post-Easter Jesus is real.

This awareness has helped me to see the gospel of John in a new light. The anger I felt toward John when I first learned it was not an accurate portrayal of the historical Jesus has been replaced by a deep appreciation. To use the great "I am" statements that run throughout John to illustrate this point, why would the early Christian community out of which John's gospel comes portray Jesus as saying about himself, "I am the light of the world," "I am the bread of life," "I am the way, the truth, and the life," if Jesus did not speak that way about himself? I now see the answer: this is how they experienced the post-Easter Jesus. For them, the post-Easter Jesus was the light that led them out of darkness, the spiritual food that nourished them in the midst of their journey, the way that led them from death to life.

That is, John's gospel is a powerful testimony to the reality and significance of the post-Easter Jesus, the living Christ of Christian experience. John's gospel is "true," even though its account of Jesus' life story and sayings is not, by and large, historically factual. My journey from the childhood state of precritical naiveté through the critical thinking of adolescence and adulthood now led to hearing John (and the Bible as a whole) in a state of postcritical naiveté—a state in which one can hear these stories as "true stories," even while knowing that they are not literally true.\textsuperscript{12}

BEYOND BELIEF TO RELATIONSHIP

Finally, as I complete my story of how I met Jesus again, I want to mention briefly how these changes in my image of Jesus affected my vision of the Christian life. Until my late thirties, I saw the Christian life as being primarily about believing. Like many of us, as a child I had no problem with belief. But at the end of childhood there began a period, lasting over twenty years, in which, like many, I struggled with doubt and disbelief. All through this period I continued to think that believing was what the Christian life was all about. Yet no matter how hard I tried, I was unable to "do" that, and I wondered how others could.

Now I no longer see the Christian life as being primarily about believing. The experiences of my mid-thirties led me to realize that God is and that the central issue of the Christian life is not believing in God or believing in the Bible or believing in the Christian tradition. Rather, the Christian life is about entering into a relationship with that to which the Christian tradition points, which may be spoken of as God, the risen living Christ, or the Spirit. And a Christian is one who lives out his or her relationship to God within the framework of the Christian tradition.

I sometimes joke that if I were ever to write my spiritual autobiography, I would call it "Beyond Belief." The fuller title would be "Beyond Belief to Relationship." That has been my experience. My own journey has led beyond belief (and beyond doubt and disbelief) to an understanding of the Christian life as a relationship to the Spirit of God—a relationship that involves one in a journey of transformation. It is this understanding of the Christian life that I will develop in the rest of this book.
NOTES

1. Luke 2.1, KJV (the Bible used in my childhood); the story continues through 2.20. Most often in this book I use the New Revised Standard Version as a basis for quotations from the Bible, which I have modified for greater clarity or to make pronouns for God gender inclusive. I use inclusive language not as a matter of "political correctness" but because of its intrinsic importance.

2. This notion was developed by Paul Ricoeur, who refers to precritical naïveté as "first naïveté" and to the parallel (but quite different) state of postcritical naïveté as "second naïveté" (see my discussion of this latter state later in this chapter). For an excellent study of Ricoeur's approach to Scripture, see Mark Wallace, The Second Naïveté: Barth, Ricoeur, and the New Yale Theology (Macon, GA: Mercer Univ. Press, 1990).

3. My teacher was Paul Spong, now a professor of theology at Luther Northwestern Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, and the author of a number of books on Christian theology.

4. The course was taught by the British scholar W. D. Davies at Union Theological Seminary in Manhattan. In the spectrum of biblical scholarship at the time, Davies was a moderate, reflecting the moderation characteristic of much British New Testament scholarship.

5. The church throughout its history has consistently referred to the authors of the gospels as evangelists. The term rightly suggests that they are not disinterested reporters or straightforward historians, but proclaimers of a message: the "good news" of the new life available through Jesus.

6. For an excellent, accessible introduction to this understanding of the gospels, see W. Barnes Tatum, In Quest of Jesus (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982). The most widely accepted scholarly understanding is that Mark is the earliest gospel, written around A.D. 70. Matthew and Luke were written some ten to twenty years later, and both used Mark as well as the document known as "Q," a collection of sayings of Jesus totaling about two hundred verses, perhaps collected together as early as A.D. 50. John may be independent of the other three gospels and is typically dated around A.D. 90 to 100.


11. Acts 17.28. For another well-known biblical passage that speaks of God as the encompassing everywhere-present Spirit, see Psalm 139.

12. The state of postcritical naïveté is nicely illustrated by the account of an Native American storyteller who always began telling his tribe's story of creation by saying, "Now, I don't know if it happened this way or not, but I know this story is true."