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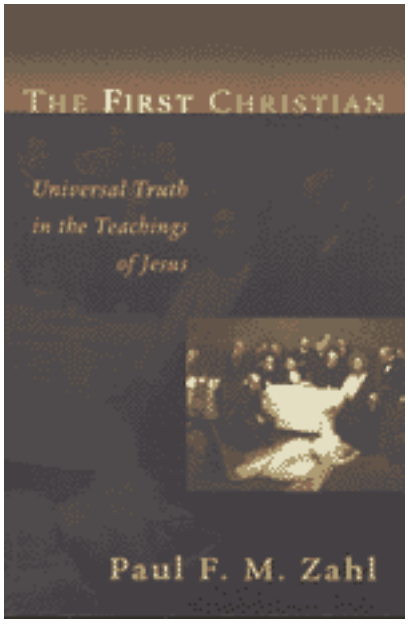

Zahl, Paul F. M.

The First Christian: Universal Truth in the Teachings of Jesus

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This book by Paul F. M. Zahl has surprising implications unforeseen even by its author. It is billed as "an exercise in New Testament theology" (ix). Jesus, Zahl declares, was "the First Christian," and this can be so only because the relation between Jesus and his Judaic background is not what mainstream biblical scholars have thought (4). Zahl finds most prominent biblical scholars constructing a "hypercontextualized" Jesus who is largely *continuous* with his Judaic background (7). He sees Jesus as mainly *discontinuous* with his own Judaic context and thinks that this is the only way the Christian faith can offer more than simply "Judaism for gentiles."

Accordingly, at points throughout the book and without any evident embarrassment, Zahl refers to the historical Jesus as "Christ." Chapter 1 is a partisan review of various quests for the historical Jesus. Zahl has admiration for the second quest and not much hope for the third. He also has barely contained zeal for beginning a fourth (37) that would reassert the traditional "grace-Christianity" of the Reformers (7).

Interestingly, chapter 2 ("Jesus the Jew") focuses on Zahl's views on promoting interfaith dialogue, modeled on the work of the Jewish scholar David Flusser (*Jesus* [Magnus, 2001]. In Flusser, Zahl has met one whose "contextualized" Jesus is, for Zahl,

surprisingly congenial—owing no doubt to Flusser's allowance for the historical Jesus' messianic self-consciousness (62). Then in chapter 3 the discontinuity theme is resumed in a discussion of Jesus' break from John the Baptist over the apocalyptic timetable. Jesus' eschatology was "open-ended and transitional" rather than immediate (77). Zahl regards chapter 4 as the center of the book, where he uses five Synoptic pericopes to expand this "discontinuous" eschatology into the centerpieces of his Christianity theology: original sin and Luther's *simul iustus et peccator*. Chapter 5 is Zahl's attempt to stride Lessing's ditch and to ground universality of Christianity in the particularity of the biblically "implicit" incarnation (116).

There are a number of good things about this book. Zahl is Dean of Cathedral Church of the Advent (Episcopal) in Birmingham, Alabama, and his pastoral concern shines through his scholarly agenda as he tries to make a complicated topic intelligible to the informed lay reader. He takes great pains not to lose his reader in a morass of "too much explanation" (24)—not an easy task when key elements of his topic tend to disappear as soon as they are simplified. Though it reflects a scholarly aspiration as well—Zahl explicitly hopes for a fourth quest for the historical Jesus, in the spirit of his teacher Ernst Käsemann (12)—the book also benefits from illustrations from popular culture, from the films of John Ford and episodes of *The Twilight Zone* to news reports from Northern Ireland (as well as references to Jane Austin). Zahl even has some good things to say about women's issues and the Harlem Renaissance (111).

Zahl rather boldly voices some important concerns that, out of regard for the sensibilities of others, often remain unspoken in polite academic circles. Though he seems sensitive to some of the anti-Semitic consequences of Christian triumphalism (3, 10), he thinks that the aim of theological scholarship should not be "religious harmony for its own sake," as if truth did not matter. For Christians, the aim should be understanding the truth as they faithfully believe it to be and appropriation of its reconciling power (9). He thinks that there are, at best, limited benefits for Christians who reflect on their own tradition solely from the standpoint of "Holocaust guilt and Christian shame" (4), and he is rightly wary of the uncritical attitudes of anyone whose Jesus research is captive to an antifundamentalist agenda (53). I think Zahl is obviously correct in observing that people can be closed-minded even while preaching openness and that this is not a weakness exclusively of traditionally minded Christians (48). Liberals might do well to remember all this.

But all is not well within these pages. Some statements made in this book are as misleading as others are insightful. Zahl says that "even the most skeptical scholars" regard Luke 16:18 as authentic (91), whereas in fact the Jesus Seminar regards the passage as uncertain (Funk and Hoover, *The Five Gospels* [HarperSanFrancisco, 1993],

360). He declares that the Jesus of the third quest is really nothing more than "a variant of Judaism" (36)—a fact that would greatly surprise most members of the Jesus Seminar (who in Zahl's account sound like disciples of E. P. Sanders). When Zahl says that Schweitzer "never recovered, religiously, from the death of the [first] quest" (22), one wonders exactly what kind of religious "recovery" should be needed by a man who, in the prime of his life, chose to give up financial security and several promising careers just to minister to the medical needs of strangers from another continent.

Zahl's readiness to pass over these kinds of details is telling. Perhaps most telling of all is the fact that Zahl restricts himself to interpreting his Jesus only from the standpoint of the "antithesis" between "grace-Christianity as over against law-Christianity" (7). One naturally wonders if this does not narrow the theological options a bit much, and it certainly plays strangely with Zahl's stated intention of emphasizing the discontinuity with Judaism, for it requires Christians first to become preoccupied over fulfilling the law (as Paul's audience in Romans already was) just in order to recognize that justification under the law is a fruitless hope (81). There is a Judaizing tendency in much Reformation theology, and Zahl, despite his emphasis upon the discontinuities, certainly exhibits that in this book.

Clearly Zahl misses an opportunity here to press the very point he wants to promote. The historical person of Jesus is Christianity's most formative historical influence. As Zahl would point out, if Jesus were just "an unusual rabbi caught up in a political vice turned by the Romans" (7), it might be a little hard to see why he attracted such attention in his own lifetime. But Zahl does not consider how *even harder* it would be, in that case, to see why Jesus attracted such *diverse* attention thereafter—not only from the Pauline/ Augustinian wing of Christianity that won out in the West (and in the thinking of Zahl himself) and from the rather different Eastern tradition of Gregory Nazianzen and John of Damascus (which Zahl almost ignores), but from the various Gnostics, Ebionites, and others who early on had their own interpreted memory of Jesus. As a purely historical matter, the more diverse these early responses, the less likely that the main impetus behind the Jesus legend can plausibly be attributed to the imagination of Paul (84), rather than the person of the historical Jesus himself. So it is remarkable in a way that Zahl ignores this early diversity entirely, because it would count in favor of his concern that Christianity's development—its "centrifugal force" (108)—have more to do with the person of Jesus himself than some contemporary scholars are eager to admit.

But in another way Zahl's selective attention in this matter is not surprising at all. It is the way biblical theology has traditional been done by Protestants. Zahl follows this line rather closely, in theological substance if not always in rhetoric. Rhetorically, he professes an interest in dialogue with those of other persuasions, and there is no

indication in the book of any insincerity on his part. But he says that "for dialogue to take place, I must be willing, at least one percent of me, to question my Christology to its roots. The other person, my dialogue partner, has got to be willing to do the same" and admit that it is "just possible" that the historical Jesus was something like Christian traditionalists think he was (48–49). Now, what does this really mean? It has the ring of reciprocal reasonableness, even of old liberal rationalism: belief should not be clung to "if the grounds for it are uprooted by proof" (51). But it is not clear that *anything* a researcher is really likely to produce could count as reliable "disproof" for Zahl—not because the evidence is so clear but because of what Zahl is willing to count as evidence in the first place. A change in his evidential criteria might *follow* from an abandonment of his orthodox Reformation faith, but evidence itself is unlikely to induce the abandonment, and Zahl seems unaware of this.

Nor is he always aware of the implications that derive from the work of those he cites. When he briefly mentions Norman Perrin as the "principle English-language interpreter" of the second quest he so admires (30), Zahl cites two publications for which Perrin will probably not be remembered while failing to mention the more important works, especially *Rediscovering the Teachings of Jesus* (Harper & Row, 1967)—which is quite odd in view of that book's importance in promoting the criterion of discontinuity ("dissimilarity") so crucial for Zahl's own thinking. It turns out that Perrin's use of that criterion would not have served Zahl very well anyway, because Perrin insisted, in a very different spirit from Zahl, that the burden of proof is really on those like Zahl himself, who ascribe authenticity to a saying (*Rediscovering,* 39).

In other words, despite his use of "discontinuity" as a determining concept, Zahl is really interested in *continuity* with one of the historical traditions that have called themselves "Christian" (95, 113). If he really believed that "the discontinuity of something is always its key constituent" (33), then he would follow Perrin in applying discontinuity to the relation between Jesus and the very early Christians—which would leave him with a rather different view on the Reformation tradition.

It is tempting to either laud or lampoon Zahl as "conservative"—and of course he is. But Zahl has an interesting relation to "liberalism," unexpected from the conservative tilt of his book. Hints of this emerge in the book's sermonic epilogue, where he cites favorably the liberal evangelical hymnodists Phillip Brooks ("O Little Town of Bethlehem," 1867) and Edmund Hamilton Sears ("It Came upon a Midnight Clear," 1846). Digging a little deeper, in fact, we can find two projects in Zahl's book—one of which is quite compatible with much of traditional liberal theology. What he calls "the core of Christianity's worldview" (15) is an ethical portrayal of agapic life: compassion for perpetrators and victims alike, confident hope in renewal under any and all

circumstances, attentiveness to the inner life. This emphasis on inwardness in one's relations toward others is perhaps better included under the term "evangelical" (rather than either "liberal" or "conservative"), and it forms the basis for much of the obvious passion and overt goodwill that informs Zahl's project. It is at least part of the substance of the universalistic anthropological claims Zahl wants to make.

But what about the other of Zahl's projects here, namely, Christian uniqueness (89)? This suggests another point that liberals might do well to keep in mind. Zahl declares, in one rhetorical breath, that "the uniqueness and the continuing universality of Christianity are at stake" in his project (2), as if uniqueness and universality were one and the same issue. They are not, and this is certainly a lesson to be drawn from *The First Christian*—however surprising this might be for its author.