

## Perspective Digest

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### The Case of the Blinking Theologians (Frontiers of Theology)

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## THE CASE OF THE BLINKING THEOLOGIAN<sup>\*</sup>

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They had worked toward this moment for a decade. Yet when the time came to vote on the historical accuracy of the Resurrection, the group of liberal Bible scholars known as the Jesus Seminar blinked.

First, they declared that the Easter Resurrection—which orthodox Christian theology views as a historic event—never happened in any physical sense. But the very next day, the 45 scholars gathered recently in a hotel ballroom in Santa Rosa, California, voted again. This time they declared: “Belief in Jesus’ Resurrection does not depend on what happened to his corpse.”

Their declaration has at its core this question: To what degree can contemporary standards of historical review be applied to matters of faith—and, indeed, does it even make sense to try?

For Christians, no debate is more explosive than that over the New Testament accounts of the resurrection of Jesus; many creeds have belief in the Resurrection as a central element in allegiance to church teachings.

Says Michael J. Wilkins, a profes-

sor at the evangelical Talbot School of Theology in La Mirada, California: “All they’re doing is repeating the old line of the Enlightenment. Anything that’s outside the mechanistic, secularistic view they automatically exclude.”

Episcopal bishop John Shelby Spong of Newark, New Jersey, says that the question is not “Did the Resurrection really happen? That can only be answered yes or no. That leads you nowhere.”

Says Spong, author of *Resurrection: Myth or Reality*: “The details of the Resurrection are not what is important.” Rather, what we need to consider is “the impact that the experience—no matter how you define it—had on Jesus’ followers.”

Another Jesus Seminar critic, John P. Meier, a Roman Catholic priest and professor of New Testament at Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., argues that too little is known about the details of Jesus’ life to reach any

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<sup>\*</sup>*Edited from a Religious News Service report; William Johnsson’s quote was secured by Perspective Digest.*

substantive conclusions about Him as a man.

Says Meier: "We all agree that something took place in Palestine in the first century involving a man named Jesus. But as far as the quest for the historical Jesus, it simply is beyond our ability to investigate because we lack the data needed for scientific research."

Gerd Leudemann, a German New Testament scholar and author of *The Resurrection of Jesus: History, Experience, Theology* says, "It was an ecstatic event that did not involve the body."

Seminar members believe that stripping Christianity of the mythology and mysticism in which it is, according to them, mistakenly grounded, will have a beneficial effect.

Daryl D. Schmidt, a professor of New Testament studies at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, explains the Resurrection as a metaphor. "To say the righteous are raised from the dead in this Jewish tradition is to say God vindicates this cause and this person. It says nothing about physical resurrection."

According to John Dominic Crossan, a seminar co-founder who teaches biblical studies at DePaul University in Chicago, the "honesty of Christianity is at stake" in admitting "that what it calls fact is really an act of faith."

Some scholars see their emphasis on the historical Jesus as perhaps the last hope for reinvigorating those mainline denominations that in recent decades have lost millions of congregants. Says David Loehr, a Jesus Seminar fellow and Unitarian minister in Kalamazoo, Michigan:

"Few ministers even in nonfundamentalist churches dare contradict official dogma even though they know better. And so the people, no longer buying literalism, have thrown out the message with the vehicle. This is the way to get people back into liberal religion."

William Johnsson, editor of the *Adventist Review*, has a different perspective. Says Johnsson, a New Testament scholar: "Mainline churches are declining, not because they teach a literal Resurrection but because they have reduced the Bible to fairy-tale status by following what Peter called 'cunningly devised fables.'"

"If churches really want to grow," says Johnsson, "they will do well to follow the teaching that converted thousands in a day and, later, sent the church forth on its worldwide mission. Paul, writing within 25 years of Jesus' death, declared that 'Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures'" (1 Cor. 15:3, 4, KJV). □