

(November 3, 1985)

Sometimes two things which happen quite independently of each other nevertheless seem related, at least to the extent that they seem to reinforce each other in the reflections to which they give rise.

The first of two such incidents which occurred to me in the last week or so arose when an attender of this Meeting asked my advice about how to cope with the "Cristocentrism" of Fifteenth Street Meeting Friends.

I hope I do not offend anyone present, but I must acknowledge being taken somewhat aback by this description of Fifteenth Street Monthly Meeting. "Something must be happening in our Meeting which I have not quite caught up with," I thought to myself, while nevertheless promising to be as helpful as I could be.

Then, only a few days later, I received a letter from those planning the 1986 sessions of Friends General Conference asking if I would be willing to be the organizer and a resource person for an interest group on "Alternative Christianity." Again, I was startled, as it seemed an exercise in barrel scraping to turn in this direction for assistance in discussing any kind of Christianity at all.

But it did give rise to thoughts about the various alternative Christianities which have waxed and waned through the ages, and which inevitably seem to say so much about the times in which they flourished. In the earliest days of the Church, when it was still part of the Jewish community, Jesus was conceived of as a kind of exemplary rabbi; later, as tension between the followers of Jesus and other Jews grew, he was understood to be the long awaited messiah, unrecognized and betrayed by the majority of his people; as the Christian community became joined with the powers of the world following the conversion of the Emperor Constantine, Jesus became the King of Kings; to the monastic ages he was the per-eminent monk, the master proponent of desert spirituality; to the philosophical ages he was the Word, the Logos, the very creative principle of the universe itself; more humanistic times saw Him as the Son of Man, the ordinary person who became divine, and have celebrated the fact that, if the Gospels are to be believed in terms of sheer number of references, this was by many times Jesus' own favorite designation for himself.

Is it now time to develop a late twentieth century version of Jesus?

An interesting thing which might relate to this matter of our mental images of Jesus is the fact that in the early days of the Church there was a raging controversy about the appropriateness of developing physical representations of Jesus. The issue revolved around the proscription by the Scriptures of graven

images, and this was tied up with the thought that any representation, however finely inspired, would be a human creation in the end, that it could not possibly capture the essence of the divine person of Jesus; that it would be, inevitably, reductionist and misleading. If those who lost this great argument had had their way, all Christian houses of worship would resemble this meeting house, in that there would be no iconography displayed.

The image of Jesus given in the Gospels is, at best, impressionistic. Although the very last days of Jesus' life are given account of in careful detail, the rest of his biography is very sketchy, at best. The Gospels give account of scattered incidents which amount, at most, to about 90 days out of Jesus' thirty-three years on earth. Yet our own hearts are searched out by these accounts, we are tested as to our understanding of the true nature of reality, of the divine form intended for human life. Perhaps the great power of the Gospels lies exactly in the fact that they ask us who Jesus was, rather than telling us.

It could be that truth will be best served by our refraining from developing yet one more kind of alternative Christianity; perhaps we should leave our image of him blank and simple, like this meeting house. Laying aside the temptation to develop one more religion of our own about Jesus may leave us open enough to find the true religion of Jesus.