

*Who Is Jesus?* by Leander E. Keck

reviewed by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [December 6, 2000](#) issue

A generation ago, Leander Keck, past dean of Yale Divinity School and Winkley Professor of Biblical Theology, emeritus, at Yale, wrote *A Future for the Historical Jesus* (1971), a book that proved to be prophetic. Who but Keck could have predicted our past decade's obsession with the history of Jesus? And who better than Keck now to call historians to task for what they have done to Jesus in the process?

A few years ago, when I heard Keck deliver a series of lectures in which he presented some of the material in this book, I recognized him as a reliable guide to help us preachers and teachers through the quagmire of the contemporary "Who was Jesus?" debate. Keck argues that there is no "Jesus of history" to be recovered from the dim past, no Jesus who can be separated from our contemporary experience of him. Jesus is neither just a figure of the past nor less than what we know of his past. Rather, Jesus embodies the past in the perfect tense. Nevertheless, what history gives us prohibits us from making Jesus over into someone who is more palatable to our tastes. Unlike some (like Luke Timothy Johnson) who have attacked the most recent Jesus quest, Keck values what we know historically of who Jesus was. History keeps pushing us back to the strange, enticing wonder that is Jesus.

Keck rarely mentions the work of the "Jesus Seminar," though it seems to lurk in the back of his mind. Historian that he is, he begins by noting the limits of historical reconstructions of Jesus. "The Jesus quest is a bequest of the Enlightenment," he says, despite the recent quest's disclaimers. Few of those involved in the quest, past or present, can shake their governing assumption "that the Jesus of history differed drastically from the Jesus Christ of the Christian faith." As a result, the quest has tended to produce a strange irony; "the real Jesus of history is distanced from the Christianity that emerged in his name and embedded in the Judaism that largely refused the message about him." After reading Keck's wonderful survey of the first "quest" for the historical Jesus, one is hard pressed to say how the Jesus Seminar, despite all the ruckus it has raised, has improved much on 19th-century scholars like David Friedrich Strauss and Hermann Samuel Reimarus who tried to get back to the real Jesus.

What Keck does so well in *Who Is Jesus?* is to bring a theological perspective to his encounters with Jesus and with those who are searching for him. He takes us through four aspects of Jesus and masterfully spins out their deep theological implications: Jesus the Jew, Jesus the teacher, Jesus's death and the living God, and Jesus in the moral life. His reflection upon the cross of Jesus and its significance is especially enlightening, though Keck also has an engaging chapter on Jesus the judge and its implications for ethics.

Keck recounts the consensus on why Jesus was crucified. But he suggests that the fundamental question is not the one put by the historians, "Why would anybody have killed Jesus?," but rather a more theological "Why would anybody worship Jesus?" This fine book is a vivid reminder that the best reasons for caring about Jesus are theological in the first place.