

JESUS AND THE DISINHERITED

by Howard Thurman

Forward by Vincent Harding

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Forward

A superficial encounter with the title of Howard Thurman's classic statement, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, could easily lead us to anticipate a 1940's version of liberation theology, with its now familiar message that God is on the side of the oppressed, with its powerful and prophetic condemnation of the oppressors and their cruel systems of dehumanization, with its urgent calls to repentance, resistance, and hope. But nothing in Thurman's large and magnificently varied body of work ever yielded itself to superficial readings, and this invaluable half-century-old text is no exception.

For although it is possible to glean elements of a liberation theology from its pages, this richly endowed, seminal work can be more accurately and helpfully described as a profound quest for a liberating spirituality, a way of exploring and experiencing those crucial life points where personal and societal transformation are creatively joined. It is the centerpiece of the Black prophet-mystic's lifelong attempt to bring the harrowing beauty of the African-American experience into deep engagement with what he called "the religion of Jesus." Ultimately his goal was to offer this humanizing combination as the basis for an emancipatory way of being, moving toward a fundamentally unchained life that is available to all the women and men everywhere who hunger and thirst for righteousness, especially those "who stand with their backs against the wall."

Stating his central intention in a slightly different way, early in the book Thurman said that he had written for "those who need profound succor and strength to enable them to live in the present with dignity and creativity." Still, the great teacher, preacher, and sage never strayed far from his basic urgent metaphor of the wall. Repeatedly he announced that he was attempting to explore and explain "what the teachings of Jesus have to say to those who stand at a moment in human history with their backs against the wall...the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed." In essence he was surveying the world of the oppressed and asking how it might be possible for human beings to endure the terrible pressures of the dominating world without losing their humanity, without forfeiting their souls.

For Thurman this project was no distanced, merely intellectual task. (Of course, no work of his ever took on that character.) At the outset he made it clear that his interest in the issues "has been and continues to be both personal and professional." Born into the Black community of Daytona Beach, Florida, at the beginning of the century, he was carefully nurtured by a maternal grandmother who had come through the fierce crucible of slavery

while “leaning on the Lord.” So Thurman possessed an intimate knowledge of the harsh contours and consequences of America’s walls as well as a profound appreciation for the amazing inner resources of those people who had stood firmly against the hardness without losing their humanity or betraying their souls. And there was never any doubt in his mind that the life and teachings of Jesus, “the poor Jew” of Nazareth, the disinherited, threatened subject of Roman power, were especially relevant to the ever-present contingent of Black men and women who lined the serrated, cutting surfaces of the wall called America. So he could unhesitatingly declare that “the striking similarity between the social position of Jesus in Palestine and that of the vast majority of American Negroes is obvious to anyone who tarries long over the facts.”

Thurman had been tarrying over and wrestling with these urgent matters for most of his adult life. he took the concerns with him when he left Florida in 1919 to attend Morehouse College in Atlanta, and was able to discuss them with fellow students such as Martin Luther King, Sr., faculty members such as Benjamin E. Mays and F. Franklin Frazier, and the visionary president of the school, John Hope. The issues and questions were unavoidably on his mind as he moved on to engage the world of white theological education at Rochester Theological Seminary in upstate New York. And they were clearly even more crucial to his life in 1935 when, from his important base at Howard University’s Rankin Chapel, Thurman published the seven-page essay “good News for the Underprivileged” in the prestigious ecumenical journal *Religion in Life*. It was that essay that became the essential core of *Jesus and the Disinherited* when the book was first published in 1949.

The post-World War II years were, of course, a crucial transitional period in the history of African-Americans. New beginnings in politics, economics, and human migration were being shaped by and for Black America, and a new contingent of leaders was expressing its determination to break the power of Jim Crow, the legalized—and terrorizing—system of segregation that formed the structural core of America’s brutal wall. Thurman and his writings moved regularly, influentially among this group of “New Negroes.” At the same time he often served as pastor, preacher, and retreat leader for many of the increasing number of white men and women who sought some source of alliance with the fermenting Black forces.

Crucial to the sense of change that marked the African-American community by the end of the 1940s was its acute awareness of the rising tide of anti colonial struggles that was shaking the foundations of white, Western world hegemony in places such as Africa, India, and Asia. Thurman was a part of all that, and the “Disinherited” of his title was also meant to encompass the colonized peoples beyond the shores. (Indeed, shortly after “Good News for the Underprivileged” was published, Thurman and his gifted should

mate, wife and coworker, Sue Bailey Thurman, were visiting with Gandhi in India, seeking to learn from the Mahatma's experiences in spiritually based social struggle and responding to his well-informed questions about the African-American situation.)

When *Jesus and the Disinherited* appeared the Thurmans had already left Howard University, and Howard Thurman was serving as pastor of the nation's first intentionally interracial congregation, the Church for the Fellowship of All People in San Francisco. By that time Thurman had developed an approach to (or better, a relationship with) Jesus of Nazareth that took him beyond the central orthodoxies of American Christianity and, more importantly, was opening the way toward a liberating spirituality that made great demands on what he called the "inward center," the heart and should of the dispossessed. For the spirituality that emerged and focused itself in *Jesus and the Disinherited* carried an insistent message that life under oppression provided no excuses for avoiding a path of courageous, creative integrity. As a matter of fact, while Thurman wrote with great compassion about the difficulties faced by the marginalized peoples whose lives are constantly besieged by the threatening, destructive power of the dominating forces, still this deeply loving and caring pastor of the dispossessed would not back away from the demands of a life of integrity, a life that refuses to give into "fear, hypocrisy and hatred, the three hounds of hell that track the trail of the disinherited." For he recognized—and he believed Jesus recognized—that no external force, however great and overwhelming, can at long last destroy a people if it does not first win the victory of the spirit against them."

In the light of that perspective it was not surprising that Thurman summarized the essential message of Jesus for the disinherited in these words: "You must abandon your fear of each other and fear only God. You must not indulge in any deception and dishonesty, even to save your lives. Your words must be Yea-New; anything else is evil. Hatred is destructive to hated and hater alike. Love your enemy, that you may be children of your father who is in heaven."

Throughout the work Thurman continued to hold his disinherited people to a magnificently (some would say unrealistically-but who defines the *real* within the mystery of "the inward center"?) high set of expectations. If it is true, as some accounts indicate, that Martin Luther King, Jr. often carried a copy of this text on his many journeys, then there are creative connections along the wall that may exceed even our greatest expectations. Of course, considering the generations-long relationships between the King and Thurman families, Martin likely had the message of these pages etched on his heart. It must have provided an important addition to his own resources when Black people constantly raised with him the question that was most directly articulated in the late 1960s by Stokely Carmichael (later Kwame Toure), that stalwart of the freedom

movement who called the nations' attention to the bold and desperate cry for Black power. Not long before King's assassination in 1968 Stokely asked with mock innocence, "Dr. King, why do we have to be more moral than white folks?"

That question came out of a period when thousands of Black people were leaping away from the American wall and hurling angry, incendiary words and devices into the midst of the nation's life. When I realized that the first paperback edition of this work appeared in 1969, as the Black fires were only beginning to cool down, I wondered whether a contemporary generation of young people might possibly find any space in their lives for the firmly loving disciplines of the spirit that Thurman (and his friend, Jesus) press forward in this gift of a book. Then, just as I moved toward closing my work on this Foreword, I came across another fit, one that seemed to open the possibilities of a connection between Howard Thurman and a new generation of his (and my) children. Again the gift I found was a book, *Testimony*, a moving and impressive collection of essays and poetry edited by Natasha Tarpley and published in 1994. It was written by a group of some forty young African-American writers, most of whom were likely just entering elementary school when Thurman left us in the spring of 1981. What I sensed in their deeply reflective anthology was a level of integrity, self-examination, and social concern that would have brought one of those characteristically broad and deep smiles to the face of our father in the faith. (And when I noted that *Testimony* was also published by Beacon it seemed very likely that our dear mentor was up to one of his familiar creative tricks.)

Surely some of the gifted and committed young people of *Testimony* could find a vital connection with *Jesus and the Disinherited*, even if their walls are different from the ones Thurman and his grandmother knew. That is a cause for real joy, but much more has changed in this country than the character of the walls and the number of people who now escape their harsh pressures. So any serious reflection on the possible future of this landmark work from the past must take at least two of those essential changes into consideration.

First, we need to recall the fact that in the years when Thurman was most actively wrestling with the issues and spirits that emerged in *Jesus and the Disinherited*, the Black people who provided his major points of reference in this country often gathered in and around places and events where Jesus of Nazareth was celebrated and at least nominally recognized and followed. Today, at the close of Thurman's century, those people who live most obviously with their backs against the wall—for instance, the homeless, the working and jobless poor, the substance abused and abusers, the alienated, misguided, and essentially abandoned young people—are rarely within hearing or seeing range of the company of Jesus' proclaimed followers. The keepers of the faith of the

master often find it very difficult, and very dangerous, to follow him into the hard places inhabited by the disinherited of America. And those wall-bruised people find no space for their presence in the places where the official followers are comfortably at worship, unless they happen to find themselves among such exceptions as the young, downwardly mobile worker-believers of the Azuza church fellowship in Dorchester, Massachusetts, or the interracial community of hope in Washington, D.D., the Abyssinian Sojourners.

On an even more complicated level, in this increasingly pluralistic nation Thurman's "religion of Jesus" and its strange mutation, American Christianity, are no longer considered the automatic, official possessors of any privileged monopoly on the truth of God or humanity. So Jesus' guidance for the disinherited may be available only through some direct, creative, perhaps disguised encounters between those whose wounded backs and spirits testify to the continuing reality of the walls and those who may no longer be forcibly pressed against them but who know the walls and the continuing reality of the walls and those who may no longer be forcibly pressed against them but who know the walls and the continuing struggle against the hounds of fear, hypocrisy, and hatred, and have determined to overcome. In unofficial, unprivileged, and dangerous encounters at the wall: perhaps that is the way Thurman would prefer us to meet his Jesus at the close of the twentieth century.

Of course, even in his somewhat less complicated time Thurman recognized that it would not be easy to develop models of hope from among the disinherited, and he quickly, quietly declared toward the end of his statement that "A profound piece of surgery has to take place in the very psyche of the disinherited before the great claim of the religion of Jesus can be presented. The great stretches of barren places in the soul must be revitalized, brought to life, before they can be challenged." Fortunately, he lived long enough to encounter a generation of pioneers in the 1960s (some of whom he had helped inspire) that was ready—at least for a time—to break away from the wall and take on the challenge of confrontation, healing, re-creation, and hope for themselves, for the nation, and for the world.

If he had continued in this life long enough to see Nelson Mandela walk in grateful triumph through the prison gates, away from the walls, Thurman would surely have recognized a living testimony to the power of the human spirit to overcome the founts of fear, hypocrisy, and hatred, to resist the crippling calls for vengeance. In the light of such a life it may even be possible for us to return to the original 1935 pilot essay, to remember that the revitalization of the souls of the oppressed was never an end in itself for Thurman. For there, at the beginning of this long publishing path, the Black pilgrim reminded us of the larger social purposes of such creative disciplines of the spirit. Overlooking, or forgiving, his heavy tendency toward the male pronouns that were so

much a part of his time, we are able to grasp Thurman's grandest contextual goal for the disinherited/underprivileged when he writes:

Often there are things on the horizon that point logically to a transformation of society, especially for the underprivileged, but he cannot co-operate with them because he is spiritually and intellectually confused. He mistakes fear for caution and caution for fear. Now, if his mind is free and his spirit unchained, he can work intelligently and courageously for a new day.

With Mandela as the great model of the unchained co-creator of a new day, with Malcolm as a suggestions of other liberated possibilities beyond the wall, beyond the chains, it is possible now to return to Stokely Carmichael's earlier question, and to recognize how crucial Thurman's work, Mandela's work, and Fannie Lou Hamer's work are to a full response. For such lives remind us that the ultimate issue is not being more moral than white folks, but becoming more free than we have ever been, free to engage our fullest powers in the transformative tasks that await us at the wall. As women and men moving toward our wholeness (our holiness?), we meet Thurman and the young people who are developing their *Testimony*. We meet Ella Baker and her Dorchester-loving children of Azuza. We meet countless others whose names and faces we have not seen, but know are real. We join our best young lives and rendezvous with Thurman, with his Jesus, and with all our departed and still-present veterans of the struggle for a new day. Finding unexpected companions everywhere (including at a Million Man March) whose backs and spirits will not be broken, whose lives are free to create new life, we discover why we must be more disciplined in love, integrity, and hope than anyone ever dreams. There are new worlds to build, new visions to carry forward, new companions at the wall, new days to being Good morning, Howard Thurman.

A Postmodern and postindustrial American postscript:

Although Thurman's message of the 1940s was focused on the needs of the Black representatives of the disinherited in the United States, by the last half of the final decade of the twentieth century it is clear that his message is now replete with significance for many other people as well. Latinos, Native Americans, Southeast Asians, and many women and gay and lesbian people are only the most obvious additions to Thurman's community of the wall. For the pressures of the postindustrial capitalist world order have pushed many other people against a great variety of unfamiliar and unexpected walls (and glass ceilings), and we are all hounded by the inner demons of fear, hypocrisy, and hatred. So Thurman must be taken very seriously when he still offers this work "for those who need profound succor and strength to enable them to live in the present with dignity and creativity." Shall we gather at the wall?

VINCENT HARDING

PREFACE

The significance of the religion of Jesus to people who stand with their backs against the wall has always seemed to me to be crucial. It is one emphasis which has been lacking—except where it has been a part of a very unfortunate corruption of the missionary impulse, which is, in a sense, the very heartbeat of the Christian religion. My interest in the problem has been and continues to be both personal and professional. This is the question which individuals and groups who I've in our land always under the threat of profound social and psychological displacement face; Why is it that Christianity seems impotent to deal radically, and therefore effectively, with the issues of discrimination and injustice on the basis of race, religion and national origin? Is this impotency due to a betrayal of the genius of the religion, or is it due to a basic weakness in the religion itself? The question is searching, for the dramatic demonstrations of the impotency of Christianity in dealing with the issue is underscored by its apparent inability to cope with it within its own fellowship.

I do not pretend that I have found an answer in the pages that follow; but I am deeply convinced that in the general area of my inquiry is to be found the answer without which there can be little hope that men may find in Christianity the fulfillment which it claims for its gospel.

It was in 1935, at the annual convocation of preaching at the School of Theology of Boston University, that I first gave formal shape to the basic idea in this study. Under the title "good News for the Underprivileged," it was published as an article in *Religion in Life*, Summer, 1935. Subsequently the same ideas were developed in a prose poem on Jesus, "The Great Incarnate Words," which appeared in the magazine *Motive* in January, 1944. Later this prose poem was published as part of a volume of poetic meditations under the title *The Greatest of These*. The comprehensive study of which this book is the full development was presented as the Mary L. Smith Memorial Lectures at Samuel Huston College, Austin Texas, in April 1948.

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HOWARD THURMAN

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CHAPTER ONE

JESUS

an Interpretation

To some God and Jesus may appeal in a way other than to us: some may come to faith in God and to love, without a conscious attachment to Jesus. Both Nature and good men beside Jesus may lead us to God. They who seek God with all their hearts must, however, some day on their way meet Jesus.

Weinel and Widgery, Jesus in the Nineteenth Century and After

Many and varied are the interpretations dealing with the teachings and the life of Jesus of Nazareth. But few of these interpretations deal with what the teachings and the life of Jesu have to say to those who stand, at a moment in human history, with their backs against the wall.

To those who need profound succor and strength to enable them to live in the present with dignity and creativity, Christianity often has been sterile and of little avail. The conventional Christian word is muffled, confused, and vague. Too often the price exacted by society for security and respectability is that the Christian movement in its formal expression must be on the side of the strong against the weak. This is a matter of tremendous significance, for it reveals to what extent a religion that was born of a people acquainted with persecution and suffering has become the cornerstone of a civilization and of nations whose very position in modern life has too often been secured by a ruthless use of power applied to weak and defenseless peoples.

It is not a singular thing to hear a sermon that defines what should be the attitude of the Christian toward people who are less fortunate than himself. Again and again our missionary appeal is on the basis of the Christian responsibility to the needy, the ignorant, and the so-called backward peoples of the earth. There is a certain grandeur and nobility

in administering to another's need out of one's fullness and plenty One could be selfish, using his possessions—material or spiritual—for strictly private or personal ends. It is certainly to the glory of Christianity that it has been most insistent on the point of responsibility to others whose only claim upon one is the height and depth of their need. This impulse at the heart of Christianity is the human *will to share* with others what one has found meaningful to oneself elevated to the height of a moral imperative. But there is a lurking danger in this very emphasis. It is exceedingly difficult to hold oneself free from a certain contempt for those whose predicament makes moral appeal for defense and succor. It is the sin of pride and arrogance that has tended to vitiate the missionary impulse and to make of it an instrument of self-righteousness on the one hand and racial superiority on the other.

That is one reason why, again and again, there is no basic relationship between the simple practice of brotherhood in the commonplace relations of life and the ethical pretension of our faith. It has long been a matter of serious moment that for decades we have studied the various peoples of the world and those who live as our neighbors as objects of missionary endeavor and enterprise without being at all willing to treat them either as brothers or as human beings. I say this without rancor, because it is not an issue in which vicious human beings are involved. But it is one of the subtle perils of a religion which calls attention—to the point of overemphasis sometimes—to one's obligation to administer to human need.

I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of times that I have heard a sermon on the meaning of religion, of Christianity, to the man who stands with his back against the wall. It is urgent that my meaning be crystal clear. The masses of men live with their backs constantly against the wall. They are the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed. What does our religion say to them? The issue is not what it counsels them to do for others whose need may be greater, but what religion offers to meet their own needs. The search for an answer to this question is perhaps the most important religious quest of modern life.

In the fall of 1935 I was serving as chairman of a delegation sent on a pilgrimage of friendship from the students of America to the students of India, Burma, and Ceylon. It was at a meeting in Ceylon that the whole crucial issue was pointed up to me in a way that I can never forget. At the close of a talk before the Law College, University of Colombo, on civil disabilities under states' rights in the United States, I was invited by the principal to have coffee.

We drank our coffee in silence. After the service had been removed, he said to me, "what are you doing over here? I know what the newspapers say about a pilgrimage of

friendship and the rest, but that is not my question. What are *you* doing over here? This is what I mean.

“More than three hundred years ago your forefathers were taken from the western coast of Africa as slave. The people who dealt in the slave traffic were Christians. One of your famous Christian hymn writers, Sir John Newton, made his money from the sale of slaves to the New World. He is the man who wrote ‘How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds’ and ‘Amazing Grace’—there may be others, but they are the only ones I know. The name of one of the famous British slave vessels was ‘Jesus.’”

“The men who bought the slaves were Christians. Christians ministers, quoting the Christian apostle Paul, gave the sanction of religion to the system of slavery. Some seventy years or more ago you were freed by a man who was not a profession Christian, but was rather the spearhead of certain political, social, and economic forces, the significance of which he himself did not understand. During all the period since then you have lived in a Christian nation in which you are segregated, lynched, and burned. even in the church, I understand, there is segregation. One of my students who went to your country sent me a clipping telling about the Christian church in which the regular Sunday worship was interrupted so that many could join a mob against one of your fellows. When He had been caught and done to death, they came back to resume their worship of their Christian God. “

“I am a Hindu. I do not understand. Here you are in my country, standing deep within the Christian faith and tradition. I do not wish to seem rude to you But, sir, I think you are a traitor tool the darker peoples of the earth I am wondering what you, an intelligent man, can say in defense of your position.”

Our subsequent conversation lasted for more than five hours. The clue tony own discussion with this probing, honest, sympathetic Hindu is found in my interpretation of the meaning of the religion of Jesus. It is a privilege, after so long a time, to set down what seems to me to be an essentially creative and prognostic interpretation of Jesus as religious subject rather than religious object. it is necessary to examine the religion of Jesus against the background of his own age and people, and to inquire into the context of his teaching with reference to the disinherited and the underprivileged.

We begin with the simple historical fact that Jesus was a Jew. The miracle of the Jewish people is almost as breath-taking as the miracle of Jesus. Is there something unique, some special increment of vitality in the womb of the people out of whose loins he came, that made of him a logical flowering of a long development of racial experience, either ethical in quality and Godlike intone? It is impossible for Jesus to be understood outside of the

sense of community which Israel held with God. This does not take anything away from him; rather does it heighten the challenge which his life presents, for such reflection reveals him as the product of the constant working of the creative mind of God upon the life, thought, and character of a race of men. Here is one who was so conditioned and organized within himself that he became perfect instrument for the embodiment of a set of ideals—ideals of such dramatic potency that they were capable of changing the calendar, re-channeling the thought of the world, and placing anew sense of the rhythm of life in a weary, nerve-snapped civilization.

How different might have been the story of the last two thousand years on this planet grown old from suffering if the link between Jesus and Israel had never been severed! What might have happened if Jesus, so perfect a flower from the brooding spirit of God in the soul of Israel, had been permitted to remain where his roots would have been fed by the distilled elements accumulated from Israel's wrestling with God! The thought is staggering. The Christian Church has tended to overlook its Judaic origins, but the fact is the Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew of Palestine when he went about his Father's business, announcing the acceptable year of the Lord.

Of course it may be argued that the fact that Jesus was a Jew is merely coincidental, that God could have expressed himself as easily and effectively in a Roman. True, but the fact is he did not. And it is with that fact that we must deal.

The second most important fact for our consideration is that Jesus was a poor Jew. There is recorded in Luke the account of the dedication of Jesus at the temple: "and when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were accomplished, they brought him...to the Lord; (as it is written in the law of the Lord, Every male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord;) and to offer a sacrifice according to that which is said in the law of the Lord. A pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons." When we examine the regulation in Leviticus, an interesting fact is revealed: "And when the days of her purifying are fulfilled, for a son,... she shall bring a lamb of the first year for a burnt offering, and a young pigeon or a turtledove, for a sin offering....And if she be not able to bring a lamb, then she shall bring two turtles, or two young pigeons; the one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering."

The economic predicament with which he was identified in birth placed him initially with the great mass of men on the earth. The masses of the people are poor. If we dare take the position that in Jesus there was at work some radical destiny, it would be safe to say that in his poverty he was more truly Son of man than he would have been if the indecent of family or birth had made him a rich son of Israel. It is not a point to be labored, for again

and again men have transcended circumstance of birth and training; but it is an observation not without merit.

The third fact is that Jesus was a member of a minority group in the midst of a larger dominant and controlling group. In 63 B.C. Palestine fell into the hands of the Romans. After this date the gruesome details of loss of status were etched, line by line, in the sensitive soul of Israel, dramatized ever by an increasing desecration of the Holy Land. To be sure, there was Herod, an Israelite, who ruled from 37 to 4 BC; but in some ways he was completely apostate. Taxes of all kinds increased, and out of these funds, extracted from the vitals of the people, temples in honor of Emperor Augustus were built within the boundaries of the holy soil. It was a sad and desolate time for the people. Herod became the symbol of shame and humiliation for all of Israel.

In Galilee a certain revolutionary, whose name was Judas, laid siege to the armory at Sepphoris and, with weapons taken there, tried to re-establish the political glory of Israel. How terrible amount! The whole city of Sepphoris was regarded as a hostage, and Roman soldiers, aided by the warriors of King Aretas of Arabia, reduced the place to white ash. In time the city was rebuilt—and perhaps Jesus was one of the carpenters employed from Nazareth, which was a neighboring village.

It is utterly fantastic to assume that Jesus grew womanhood untouched by the surging currents of the common life that made up the climate of Palestine. not only just he have been aware of them; that he was affected by them is a most natural observation. A word of caution is urgent at this pint. To place Jesus against the background of his time is by no means sufficient to explain him. Who can explain a spiritual genius—or any kind of genius, for that matter? The historical setting in which Jesus grew up, the psychological mood and temper of the age and of the House of Israel, the economic and social predicament of Jesus' family—all these are important. But they in themselves are unable to tell us precisely the thing that we most want to know: What does he differ from many others in the same setting? Any explanation of Jesus in terms of psychology, politics, economics, religion, or the like must inevitably explain his contemporaries as well. It may tell why Jesus was a particular kind of Jew, but not why some other Jews were not Jesus. And that is, after all, the most important question, since the thing which makes him most significant is not the way in which he resembled his fellows but the way in which he differed from all the rest of them. Jesus inherited the same traits as countless other Jews of his time; he grew up in the same society; and yet he was Jesus, and the others were not. Uniqueness always escapes us as we undertake an analysis of character.

On the other hand, these considerations should not blind us to the significance of the environmental factors and the social and religious heritage of Jesus in determining the

revolutionary character of some of his insights. One of the clearest and simplest statements of the issues here raised, and their bearing upon the character and teaching of Jesus, is found in Vladimir Simkhovitch's *Toward the Understanding of Jesus*. I am using his essay as the basis for our discussion of the problem, but the applications are mine. Simkhovitch says:

In the year 6 Judea was annexed to Syria; in the year 70 Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed. Between these two dates Jesus preached and was crucified on Golgotha. During all that time the life of the little nation was a terrific drama; its patriotic emotions were aroused to the highest pitch and then still more inflamed by the identification of national politics with a national religion. It is reasonable to assume that what was going on before Jesus' eyes was a closed book, that the agonizing problems of his people were a matter of indifference to him, that he had given them no consideration that he was not taking a definite attitude towards the great and all-absorbing problem of the very people whom he taught.

There is one overmastering problem that the socially and politically disinherited always face: Under what terms is survival possible? In the case of the Jewish people in the Greco-Roman world the problem was even more acute than under ordinary circumstances, because it had to do not only with physical survival in terms of life and limb but also with the actual survival of a culture and a faith. Judaism was a culture, a civilization, and a religion—a total world view in which there was no provision for any form of thoroughgoing dualism. The crucial problem of Judaism was to exist as an isolated, autonomous, cultural, religious, and political unit in the midst of the hostile Hellenic world. If there had been sharp lines distinguishing the culture from the religion, or the religion from the political autonomy, a compromise could have been worked out. Because the Jews thought that a basic compromise was possible, they sought political annexation to Syria which would bring them under Roman rule directly and thereby guarantee them, within the framework of Roman policy, religious and cultural autonomy. But this merely aggravated the already tense nationalistic feeling and made a direct, all-out attack against Roman authority inevitable.

In the midst of this psychological climate Jesus began his reaching and his ministry. His words were directed to the House of Israel, a minority within the Greco-Roman world, smarting under the loss of status, freedom, and autonomy, haunted by the dream of the restoration of a lost glory and a former greatness. His message focused on the agency of a radical change in the inner attitude of the people. He recognized fully that out of the heart are the issues of life and that no external force, however great and overwhelming, can at long last destroy a people if it does not first win the victory of the spirit against them. "To revile because one has been reviled—this is the real evil because it is the evil of the

should itself.” Jesus saw this with almighty clarity. Again and again he came back to the inner life of the individual. With increasing insight and startling accuracy he placed his finger on the “inward center” as the crucial arena where the issues would determine the destiny of his people.

When I was a seminary student, I attended one of the great quadrennial conventions of the Student Volunteer Movement. One afternoon some seven hundred of us had a special group meeting, at which a Korean girl was asked to talk to us about her impression of American education. It was an occasion to be remembered. The Korean student was very personable and somewhat diminutive. She came to the edge of the platform and, with what seemed to be obvious emotional strain, she said, “You have asked me to talk with you about my impression of American education. but there is only one thing that a Korean has any right to talk about, and that is freedom from Japan.” For about twenty minutes she made an impassioned plea for the free of her people, ending her speech with this sentence: “If you see little American boy and you ask him what he wants, he says, ‘I want a penny to put in my bank or to buy a whistle or a piece of candy.’ But if you see a little Korean boy and you ask him what he wants, he says, ‘I want freedom from Japan.’”

It was this kind of atmosphere that characterized the life of the Jewish community when Jesus was a youth in Palestine. The urgent question was what must be the attitude toward Rome. Was any attitude possible that would be morally tolerable and at the same time preserve a basic self-esteem—without which life couldn’t possibly have any meaning? The question was not academic. It was the most crucial of questions. In essence, Rome was the enemy; Rome symbolized total frustration; Rome was the great barrier to peace of mind. And Rome was everywhere. No Jewish person of the period could deal with the question of his practical life, his vocation, displace in society, until first he had settled deep within himself this critical issue.

This is the position of the disinherited in every age. What must be the attitude toward the rulers, the controllers of political, social, and economic life? This is the question of the Negro in American life. Until he has faced and settle that question, he cannot inform his environment with reference to his own life, whatever may be his preparation of his pretensions.

In the main, there were two alternative faced by the Jewish minority of which Jesus was a part. Simply stated, these were to resist or not to resist. But each of these alternatives has within it secondary alternatives.

Under the general plan of nonresistance one may take the position of imitation. The aim of such an attitude is to assimilate the culture and the social behavior-pattern of the

dominant group. it is the profound capitulation to the powerful, because it means the yielding of oneself to that which, deep within, one recognized as being unworthy. It makes for a strategic loss of self-respect. The aim is to reduce all outer or external signs of difference to zero, so that there shall be no ostensible cause for active violence or oppression. Under some circumstances it may involve a repudiation of one's heritage, one's customs, one's faith. Accurate imitation until the facade of complete assimilation is securely placed and the antagonism of difference dissolved—such is the function of this secondary alternative within the broader alternative of nonresistance. Herod was an excellent example of this solution.

To some extent this was also the attitude of the Sadducees. They represented the “upper” class. From their number came the high priests, and most of the economic security derived from contemporary worship in the temple was their monopoly. They did not represent the masses of the people. Any disturbance of the established order meant upsetting their position. They lied Israel, but they seem to have loved security more. They made their public peace with Rome and went on about the business of living. They were astute enough to see that their own position could be perpetuated if they stood firmly against all revolutionaries and radicals. Such persons would only stir the people to resist the inevitable, and in the end everything would be lost. Their tragedy was in the fact that they idealized the position of the Roman in the world and suffered the moral fate of the Romans by becoming like them. They saw only two roads open before them—become like the Romans or be destroyed by the Romans. They chose the former.

The other alternative in the nonresistance pattern is to reduce contact with the enemy to a minimum. It is the attitude of cultural isolation in the midst of a rejected culture. Cunning the mood may be—one of bitterness and hatred, but also one of deep, calculating fear. To take up active resistance would be foolhardy, for a thousand reasons. The only way out is to keep one's resentment under rigid control and censorship.

The issue raised by this attitude is always present. The opposition to those who work for social change does not come only from those who are the guarantors of the *status quo*. Again and again it has been demonstrated that the lines are held by those whose hold on security is sure only as long as the *status quo* remains intact. The reasons for this are not far to seek. If a man is convinced that he is safe only as long as he uses his power to give others a sense of insecurity, then the measure of their security is in his hands. If security or insecurity is at the mercy of a single individual or group, then control of behavior becomes routine. All imperialism functions in this way. Subject peoples are held under control by this device.

One of the most striking scenes in the movie *Ben Hur* was that in which a Roman legion marches by while hundreds of people stand silently on the roadside. As the last soldier passes, a very dignified, self-possessed Jewish gentleman with folded arms and eyes smoldering with the utmost contempt, without the slightest shift of his facial muscles spits at the heel of the receding legionary—a consummate touch. Such—in part, at least—was the attitude of the Pharisee. No active resistance against Rome—only a terrible contempt. Obviously such an attitude is a powder keg. One nameless incident may cause to burst into flame the whole gamut of smoldering passion, leaving nothing in its wake but charred corpses, mute reminders of the tragedy of life. Jesus saw this and understood it clearly.

The other major alternative is resistance. It may be argued that even nonresistance is a form of resistance, for it may be regarded as an appositive dimension of resistance. Resistance may be overt action, or it may be merely mental and moral attitudes. For the purposes of our discussion resistance is defined as the physical, overt expression of an inner attitude. resistance in this sense finds its most dramatic manifestation in force of arms.

Armed resistance is apt to be a tragic last resort in the life of the disinherited. Armed resistance has an appeal because it provides a form of expression, of activity, that releases tension and frees the oppressed from a disintegrating sense of complete impotency and helplessness. “Why can’t we do something? Something must be done!” is the recurring cry. By “something” is meant action, direct action, as over against words, subtleties, threats, and innuendoes. it is better to die fighting for freedom than to rot away in one’s chains, the argument runs.

Before I’d be a slave
I’d be buried in my grave,
And go home to my God
And be free!

The longer the mood is contemplated, the more insistent the appeal. It is a form of fanaticism, to be sure, but that may not be a vote against it. In all action there is operative a fringe of irrationality. Once the mood is thoroughly established, any council of caution is interpreted as either compromise or cowardice. The fact that the ruler has available to him the power of the state and complete access to all arms is scarcely considered. Out of the deeps of the heart there swells a great and awful assurance that because the cause is just, it cannot fail. Any failure is regarded as temporary and, to the devoted, as a testing of character.

This was the attitude of the Zealots of Jesus' day. There was added appeal in their position because it called forth from the enemy organized determination and power. It is never to be forgotten that one of the ways by which men measure their own significance is to be found in the amount of power and energy other men must use in order to crush them or hold them back. This is a less than ideal explanation of the fact that even a weak and apparently inconsequential movement becomes formidable under the pressure of great persecution. The persecution becomes a vote of confidence, which becomes, in turn, a source of inspiration, power, and validation. The zealots knew this. Jesus knew this. It is a matter of more than passing significance that he had a Zealot among his little band of followers, indeed among the twelve chosen ones.

In the face of the alternatives Jesus came forth with still another. On this point Simkhovitch makes a profound contribution to the understanding of the psychology of Jesus. He reminds us that Jesus expressed his alternative in a "brief formula—The Kingdom of Heaven is in us." he states further:

Jesus had to resent deeply the loss of Jewish national independence and the aggression of Rome...Natural humiliation was hurtling and burning. The balm for that burning humiliation was humility. For humility cannot be humiliated. ...Thus he asked his people to be tolerant from him, "For I am meek and lowly in heart; and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

It was but natural that such a position would be deeply resented by many of his fellows, who were suffering even as he was. To them it was a complete betrayal to the enemy. It was to them a counsel of acquiescence, if not of despair, full to overflowing with a kind of groveling and start cowardice. Besides, it seemed like self-deception, like whistling in the dark. All of this would have been quite true if Jesus had stopped there. He did not. He recognized with authentic realism that anyone who permits another to determine the quality of his inner life gives into the hands of the other the keys to his destiny. If a man knows precisely what he can do to you or what epithet he can hurl against you in order to make you lose your temper, your equilibrium, then he can always keep you under subjection. It is a man's reaction to things that determines their ability to exercise power over him. It seems clear that Jesus understood the anatomy of the relationship between his people and the Romans, and he interpreted that relationship against the background of the profoundest ethical insight of disowned religious faith as he had found it in the hearts of the prophets of Israel.

The solution which Jesus found for himself and for Israel, as they faced the hostility of the Greco-Roman world, becomes the word and the work of redemption for all the cast-down people in every generation and in every age. I mean this quite literally. I do not

ignore the theological and metaphysical interpretation of the Christian doctrine of salvation. But the underprivileged everywhere have long since abandoned any hope that this tip of salvation deals with the crucial issues by which their days are turned into despair without consolation. The basic facts that Christianity as it was born in the mind of this Jewish teacher and thinker appears as a technique of survival for the oppressed. That it became, through the intervening years, a religion of the powerful and the dominant, used sometimes as an instrument of oppression, must not tempt us into believing that it was thus in the mind and life of Jesus. "In him was life; and the life was the light of men." Whenever his spirit appears, the oppressed find fresh courage; for he announced the good news that fear, hypocrisy, and hatred, the three hounds of hell that track the trail of the disinherited, need have no dominion over them.

I belong to a generation that finds very little that is meaningful or intelligent in the teachings of the Church concerning Jesus Christ. It is a generation largely in revolt because of the general impression that Christianity is essentially an other-worldly religion, having as its motto: "Take all the world, but give me Jesus." The desperate opposition to Christianity rests in the fact that it seems, in the last analysis, to be a betrayal of the Negro into the hands of his enemies by focusing his attention upon heaven, forgiveness, love, and the like. It is true that this emphasis is germane to the religion of Jesus, but it has to be put into a context that will show its strength and vitality rather than its weakness and failure. For years it has been a part of my own quest so to understand the religion of Jesus that interest in his way of life could be developed and sustained by intelligent men and women who were at the same time deeply victimized by the Christian Church's betrayal of his faith.

During much of my boyhood I was cared for by my grandmother, who was born a slave and lived until the Civil War on a plantation near Madison, Florida. My regular chore was to do all of the reading for my grandmother—she could neither read nor write. Two or three times a week I read the Bible aloud to her. I was deeply impressed by the fact that she was most particular about the choice of Scripture. For instance, I might read some of the more devotional Psalms, some of Isaiah, the Gospels again and again. But the Pauline epistles, never—except, at long intervals, the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians. My curiosity knew no bounds, but we did not question her about anything.

When I was older and was half through college, I chanced to be spending a few days at home near the end of summer vacation. With a feeling of great temerity I asked her one day why it was that she would not let me read any of the Pauline letters. What she told me I shall never forget. "During the days of slavery," she said, "the master's minister would occasionally hold services for the slaves. Old man McGee was so mean that he would not let a Negro minister preach to his slaves. Always the white minister used as his

text something from Paul. At least three or four times a year he used as a text: 'Slaves, be obedient to them that are your masters..., as unto Christ.' Then he would go on to show how it was God's will that we were slaves and how, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us. I promised my Maker that if Ever earned to read and if freedom ever came, I wouldn't read that part of the Bible."

Since that fateful day on the front porch in Florida I have been working on the problem her words presented. A part of the fruits of that search throw an important light upon the issues with which I am dealing. It cannot be denied that too often the weight of the Christian movement has been on the side of the strong and the powerful and against the weak and oppressed—this, despite the gospel. A part of the responsibility seems to me to rest upon a peculiar twist in the psychology of Paul, whose wide and universal concern certainly included all men, bond and free.

Let us examine the facts. The apostle Paul was a Jew. He was the first great creative interpreter of Christianity. His letters are older than the Gospels themselves. it seems that because he was not one of the original disciples, he was never quite accepted by them as one able to speak with authority concerning the Master. The fact hung very heavily upon this our of the apostle. He did not every belong, quite. One of the disciples could always say, "But of course you do not quite understand, because, you see, you were not there when..."

But the fact remains: Paul was a Jew, even as Jesus was a Jew. By blood, training, background, and religion he belonged to the Jewish minority, about whom we have been speaking. But unlike them, for the most part, he was a free Jew; he was a citizen of Rome. A desert and a sea were placed between his status in the empire and that of his fellow Jews. A very searching dilemma was created by this fact. On the one hand, he belonged to the privileged class. He had the freedom of the empire at his disposal. There were certain citizenship rights which he could claim despite his heritage, faith, and religion. Should he deny himself merely because he was more fortunate than his follows? To what extent could he accept his rights without feeling a deep sense of guilt and betrayal? He was of a minority but with majority privileges. If a Roman soldier in some prison in Asia Minor was taking advantage of him, he could make an appeal directly to Caesar. There was always available to him a protection guaranteed by the state and respected by the minions of the state. It was like a magic formula always available in emergencies. it is to the credit of the amazing power of Jesus Christ over the life of Paul that there is only one recorded instance in which he used his privilege.

It is quite understandable that his sense of security would influence certain aspects of his philosophy of history. Naturally he would have a regard for the state, for the civil

magistrate, unlike that of his followers, who regarded them as the formal expression of legitimized intolerance. The stability of Paul's position in the state was guaranteed by the integrity of the state. One is not surprised, then, to hear him tell slaves to obey their masters like Christ, and say all government is ordained of God. (It is not to meet the argument to say that in a sense everything that is, is permitted of God, or that government and rulers are sustained by God as a concession to the frailty of man.) It would be grossly misleading and inaccurate to say that these are not to be found in the Pauline letters—utterances of a deeply different quality—utterances which reveal how his conception transcended all barriers of race and class and condition. But this other side is there, always available to those who wish to use the weight of the Christian message to oppress and humiliate their fellows. The point is that this aspect of Paul's teaching is understandable against the background of his Roman citizenship. It influenced his philosophy of history and resulted in a major frustration that has borne bitter fruit in the history of the movement which he, Paul, did so much to reject on the conscience of the human race.

Now Jesus was not a Roman citizen. He was not protected by the mortal guarantees of citizenship—that quiet sense of security which comes from knowing that you belong and the general climate of confidence which it inspires. If a Roman soldier pushed Jesus into a ditch, he could not appeal to Caesar; he would be just another Jew in the ditch. Standing always beyond the reach of citizen security, he was perpetually exposed to all the “arrows of outrageous fortune,” and there was only a gratuitous refuge—if any—within the state. What stark insecurity! What a breeder of complete civil and oral nihilism and psychic anarchy! Unless one actually lives day by day without a sense of security, he cannot understand what worlds separated Jesus from Paul at this point.

The striking similarity between the social position of Jesus in Palestine and that of the vast majority of American Negroes is obvious to anyone who carries long over the facts. We are dealing here with conditions that produce essentially the same psychology. There is meant to be further comparison. It is the similarity of a social climate at the point of a denial of full citizenship which creates the problem for creative survival. For the most part, Negroes assume that there are nonbasic citizenship rights, no fundamental protection, guaranteed to them by the state, because their status as citizens has never been clearly defined. There has been for them little protection from the dominant controllers of society and even less protection from the unrestrained elements within their own group.

The result has been a tendency to be their own protectors, to bulwark themselves against careless and deliberate aggression. The Negro has felt, with some justification, that the peace officer of the community provides no defense against the offending or offensive

white man; and for an entirely different set of reasons the piece officer gives no protection against the offending Negro. Thus the Negro feels that he must be prepared, at a moment's notice, to protect his own life and take the consequence therefor. Such a predicament has made it natural for some of them to use weapons as a defense and to have recourse to premeditated or precipitate violence.

Living in a climate of deep insecurity, Jesus, faced with so narrow a margin of civil guarantees, had to find some other basis upon which to establish a sense of well-being. He knew that the goals of religion as he understood them could never be worked out within the then-established order. Deep from within that order he projected a dream, the logic of which would give to all the needful security. There would be room for all, and no man would be a threat to his brother. "The kingdom of God is within." "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor."

The basic principles of his way of life cut straight through to the despair of his fellows and found it groundless. By inference he says, "You must abandon your fear of each other and fear only God. You must not indulge in any deception and dishonesty, even to save your lives. Your words must be Yea—Nay; anything else is evil. Hatred is destructive to hated and hater alike. Love your enemy, that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven."