

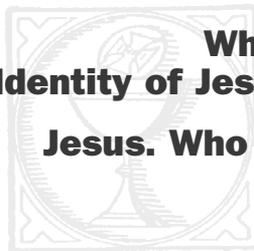
For the

LIFE of the WORLD

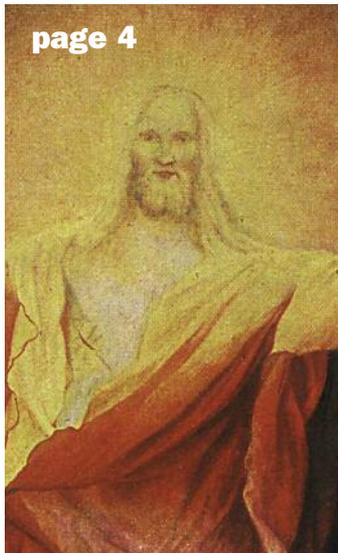
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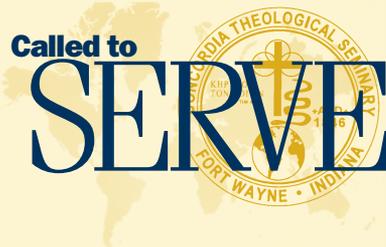
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Everybody Loves

The Culture Cherishes a

When anchorman Peter Jennings aired his 1999 television documentary “The Search for Jesus,” many Christians were alarmed. The program was promoted as “a journalist’s exploration of the historical figure of Jesus.” It turned out to be Jennings and a group of liberal Bible scholars deconstructing the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.

Jennings followed in 2004 with “Jesus and Paul: Word and Witness.” While this program was more balanced, it still failed to take seriously the historical accounts of Jesus and of the early Church. This time Christian viewers were less surprised. Some were almost convinced. After all, it all sounded so reasonable. Maybe that Jennings fellow was on to something.

Why does Jesus make the cover of *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News & World Report*, and even *Popular Mechanics*? Why is He the subject of best-selling fiction and blockbuster movies? Why is Jesus cited in support of presidential candidates, P.E.T.A., diet books, hybrid cars, and Alabama state tax reform? Everybody claims to know who Jesus was and what He would do. Everybody loves Jesus.

Jesus Is My Homeboy

During His ministry, Jesus suffered from what marketers would call “poor consumer awareness.” Jesus asked His disciples, “Who do men say I am?” The survey results at the time were confused: “John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or some other prophet.”¹

Today, Jesus enjoys almost universal name recognition. The American public seems to have a pretty good idea of who Jesus was. Seventy-five percent of Americans believe that Jesus was a real person; 77% believe that He was born of a virgin; 69% believe that Jesus was the Son of God; 67% believe that He was divine; only 44% of Americans believe that Jesus was merely human and committed sins; and 80% believe that He rose from the dead. Of those who expect His return, 45% believe that it will happen in their lifetime. Jesus is even the public figure most Americans name as their personal hero.²

Does this mean that our culture has an accurate picture of Jesus? In 1999, George W. Bush was asked to name the political philosopher that had most influenced him. He answered, “Christ, because He changed my heart.” For days afterward the media debated the meaning of this response. Did Bush consider Jesus a *political philosopher*? With Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau, Locke, Burke, and Paine to choose from, why name Jesus?

The media’s reaction was odd. After all, Bush’s answer simply reflected the conventional wisdom of the culture. In popular opinion, Jesus *is* a political philosopher. Jesus *is also* an animal rights activist, a flag-waving patriot, an environmental crusader, a champion of free trade, a feminist goddess worshiper, an enemy of gun control, and an advocate for gay marriage. Conservatives and liberals, the religious and irreligious, the moral and immoral all claim Jesus. I recently saw a T-shirt reading, “Jesus Is My Homeboy.”

Everybody has a place for Jesus. Secularists, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Agnostics, Atheists, Hindus, Universalists, Wiccans, Baha’i, Sikhs, Taoists, and New-Agers all have some place for Jesus in their ideologies. He was a good man, a prophet, a teacher, a *deva*, an *avatar*, a consciousness, an enlightened being, or a divine spirit.

Everybody loves Jesus, but why?

The Jesus of American Spirituality

In America’s consumer culture everything must be simple. Everything must be accessible to the broadest possible audience. Information, art, morals, and politics must be delivered to consumers in their lowest common denominator.



Jesus

Counterfeit Christ

By the Rev. Todd A. Wilken

Religion is no exception. Americans love *the idea* of religion but are leery of any *particular* religion. This is especially true of Christianity. Christianity is too particular, too specific. Consumers want vague spirituality.

In American spirituality, “god” is generic, man is basically good, and your problem isn’t your sin but your unrealized goodness. In American spirituality, “salvation” doesn’t require a savior, just a little self-help.

The Jesus of Christianity won’t do either. The Jesus whom Scripture reveals isn’t user-friendly. He is too harsh with sinners and too determined to die for them. He can’t stop talking about His Cross and why He must endure it. He is too human, too divine, too bloody, too dead, and too alive. So, the culture invents its own “Jesus.”

In American spirituality, Jesus is shaped by the felt needs of the culture. At one moment he is telling us to go vegan, at the next he is manning the grill at the 4th of July church picnic. He is cited by Democrats and Republicans, quoted by doves and hawks, and invoked by presidents and anarchists. When one asks, “What would Jesus do?” the Jesus of American spirituality answers, “Whatever you want.” No wonder everybody loves this Jesus. What’s not to love? This Jesus is everything the Jesus of Scripture isn’t.

Everybody loves this Jesus because he is obscure. This Jesus, if he lived at all, lived so long ago that no one can know anything about him for certain. But that’s good. That way there’s no need to delve into the details of his life. Besides, he’s more interesting (and useful) as a myth than a man. He is a shadowy figure of the past but not of the present. He is always referred to in the past tense or in the potential optative mood, “What would Jesus do, eat, drive, etc.?”

Everybody loves this Jesus because he is ambiguous. This Jesus spoke in sound bite platitudes and truisms. He didn’t have anything to prove; he just wanted to make people think. He was for good and against evil in the most general sense, without defining either one. He held the moral high ground by refusing to choose sides.

Everybody loves this Jesus because he is inoffensive. This Jesus was the nicest guy in the world. He never caused trouble; he just loved people. He was universally popular because he never got on anyone’s nerves, never overstayed his welcome, and always knew when to shut up.

Everybody loves this Jesus because he is affirming. This Jesus accepted everyone as they were. He never told anyone that they were wrong. He didn’t judge anyone. He encouraged people to believe in themselves and feel good about themselves. He taught tolerance for everyone and everything.

Everybody loves this Jesus because he is pluralistic. This Jesus never claimed to come from God, much less to *be* God. He never tried to convert anyone. He didn’t insist that his way was the only way. He came to show us that you can’t put God in a box, and that God is too big for any one religion.

This is why everybody loves Jesus. This is a Jesus shaped by 21st century postmodern sensibilities. This Jesus helps you find your purpose, reach your potential, realize your innate goodness, and achieve self-fulfillment. He was sent by a sugar-daddy god from a country club heaven to help us be all we can be. He said nice things, did nice things, and never hurt a fly. He lived to show us that we are better than we think we are. He died to show us that you can accomplish anything if you just apply yourself. His message fits neatly on a bumper sticker. His spirit is the spirit of the age.

The Jesus of American spirituality might make a good aerobics instructor, but he makes a lousy Savior. In his book,

Today, Jesus enjoys almost universal name recognition. The American public seems to have a pretty good idea of who Jesus was. Seventy-five percent of Americans believe that Jesus was a real person; 77% believe that He was born of a virgin; 69% believe that Jesus was the Son of God; 67% believe that He was divine; only 44% of Americans believe that Jesus was merely human and committed sins; and 80% believe that He rose from the dead. Of those who expect His return, 45% believe that it will happen in their lifetime. Jesus is even the public figure most Americans name as their personal hero.

“The Jesus I Never Knew,” Philip Yancey remembers the saccharine, obsequious Jesus of Sunday school lessons and asks,

*How would telling people to be nice to one another get a man crucified? What government would execute Mister Rogers or Captain Kangaroo? Thomas Paine said that no religion could be truly divine which has in it any doctrine that offends the sensibilities of a little child. Would the cross qualify?*³



The problem with the Jesus of American spirituality is he doesn't offend us. The Jesus of American spirituality lacks the offensive message of the Cross. The world needs the Savior, not the Jesus of American Spirituality.

The Real Jesus

Our culture is infatuated with a counterfeit Christ, and its up to the Church to break the spell. The only way to do this is to preach the real Jesus to every sinner at every opportunity—beginning in our own churches. We must stop preaching Jesus the therapist, Jesus the life-coach, Jesus the lover, and Jesus the enabler, and start preaching Jesus the crucified and risen Savior. We must stop looking for the Jesus in our hearts and find the real Jesus where He has promised to be found: in His Word, in His Baptism, in His Supper. We must declare the “Jesus” of culture to be false. We must show the culture the real Jesus. We must condemn sin as the real Jesus does. We must comfort sinners as only the real Jesus can. We must be determined to know nothing—nothing—but Christ and Him crucified. We must tell the culture that the real Jesus is found in His Church.

Can we blame the culture for its misperception of Jesus? Should we expect the culture to get Jesus right when the Church doesn't?

Richard Niebuhr wrote that the message of the 20th century Church was that “a God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment though the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.”⁴ Jesus without His Cross may be many things, but He is not the Savior of sinners.

What about the 21st century Church? Some in the Church today seem comfortable with the culture's misperception of Jesus. They say that it is better for a person to believe *something* about Jesus rather than nothing at all. Thus, the “Jesus” being preached in pulpit after pulpit bears little resemblance to the Christ crucified of the Bible. When the Church preaches Jesus the therapist, Jesus the life-coach, Jesus the lover, and, Jesus the enabler, the Church only reinforces the culture's misperception. This is dangerous. The real Jesus says,

*Not everyone who says to Me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?” And then I will declare to them, “I never knew you.”*⁵

Everybody loves Jesus. Many invoke His name. Many want to be associated with Him: “We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets!”⁶ But on the last day the real Jesus will respond in effect, “I don't know who that was, but it wasn't Me.”

The Church cannot afford to reinforce this case of mistaken identity. In our preaching and public discourse, it is not enough to give Jesus honorable mention and hope for the best. In a world where everybody loves Jesus, the real Jesus must be proclaimed in all of His suffering, crucified, and risen detail. David Adams has written,

*At the risk of seeming impious, we must recognize that even the Doobie Brothers can confess that “Jesus is just alright with me.” When we use the term God and the name Jesus, we invest those terms with all the proper historic Biblical content. Those around us in our culture do not. We are foolish if we believe that we are giving a Christian witness just because we use the terms god and Jesus in an orthodox way. When speaking in the public square, we must explicitly express the particularity of the Gospel message.*⁷

Our culture is infatuated with a counterfeit Christ, and its up to the Church to break the spell. The only way to do this is to preach the real Jesus to every sinner at every opportunity—beginning in our own churches. We must stop preaching Jesus the therapist, Jesus the life-coach, Jesus the lover, and Jesus the enabler, and start preaching Jesus the crucified and risen Savior. We must stop looking for the Jesus in our hearts and find the real Jesus where He has promised to be found: in His Word, in His Baptism, in His Supper.

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The real Jesus asked, “Who do men say that I am?” The survey results are still coming in, and they are still wrong. The only way to change that is for the Church to answer Jesus' next question correctly, “But who do *you* say that I am?”

1 Mark 16:13.

2 Thomas Hargrove and Guido Stempel, “Many Americans Still Wonder about the Nature of Jesus,” Scripps Howard News Service, December 18, 2003. “The Religious and Other Beliefs of Americans 2003,” February 26, 2003. The Barna Group of Ventura California, “Religious Beliefs Remain Constant But Subgroups Are Quite Different,” March 19, 2004. Princeton Survey Research Associates, “Newsweek Poll,” October 21-22, 1999. “America's Heroes,” August 15, 2001.

3 Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), pp. 13-14.

4 H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (Hamden Connecticut: Shoe String Press, 1956), p. 193.

5 Matthew 7:21-23.

6 Luke 13:26.

7 David Adams, “The Church in the Public Square in a Pluralistic Society,” *Concordia Journal*, vol. 28, no. 4 (October 2002), pp. 372-3.

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