

How Cultural Deception Has Helped Hijack Jesus

During His 3 1/2 years in ministry, Jesus made clear His true identity and the purpose of His life, death and resurrection. He left us with the Sermon on the Mount and many other kingdom principles and prophetic promises to guide our lives. Yet even before His crucifixion and resurrection, many were twisting His words to justify their own ideologies.

Indeed, throughout history, believers and unbelievers alike have misrepresented Christ's teachings—and the Bible as a whole—to support all manner of wickedness, from genocide to slavery and beyond. In our day, gospel perversions are rising rapidly as anti-Christ agendas rationalize distorted doctrines. Indeed, many are hijacking Jesus to vindicate their sinful views.

The Bible calls Jesus the Son of God, the King of kings, the Lord of lords, the Warrior, the Alpha and Omega, the Word of God, the Man of Sorrows and many other monikers. But today the image of Christ has been morphed into a Social Justice Warrior, a Postmodern King, a Liberal Lamb and a Conservative Shepherd. In hijacking Jesus, the lost are presented with a humanistic gospel and the church is offered a have-it-your-way Savior.

Deception No. 1: Social Justice Warrior

Many in the social justice movement raise Jesus up as an early proponent of their cause. And, in some respects, they're correct. Jesus is a champion of the downtrodden. He challenged the establishment powers of His day. However, holding up Jesus as the prototypical social justice warrior is to miss who He is.

For example, Jesus has plenty to say about money. In fact, the

Scriptures record Him speaking more about money than about heaven or hell—but this teaching has been distorted. Many in the wealth-redistribution and class-warfare camps within the social justice movement hyperfocus on people having all things in common (Acts 4:32) while missing the underlying biblical truth. From His praise for the poor widow who gave her last mite to His angry display of flipping merchandisers' tables in the temple, Jesus used money to teach deeper lessons about heart motives.

Consider the story of the rich young ruler who came to Jesus and asked what he must do to enter heaven (Mark 10:17-27). Jesus told the wealthy influencer to sell all he owned and give the money away. Unwilling to do so, the man left downcast. Money was an idol in his life. Jesus turned the sad encounter into a teaching moment, sharing with those who remained: "Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:24-25).

On the surface, it looks like Jesus is saying, "If you're rich, you're going to hell." But Jesus was speaking about the heart posture. He wants us to lean on Him and not on money. All throughout Scripture, countless wealthy men are held up as heroes of the faith, so being rich is not the issue. Again, serving mammon is the issue, as Jesus said you cannot serve both God and mammon (Matt. 6:24).

Jesus was not a Social Justice Warrior pressing for socialism. In fact, Jesus had a single purpose in crossing social strata and mingling with the outcasts of society: to seek and save that which was lost and deliver them from darkness. Every act of service He performed—and instructed His disciples to do—was ultimately designed for spiritual reclamation.

Focusing only on the "what" Jesus did while missing the spiritual "why" behind it all cheapens who He is and what He

came to do. Serving your fellow man is noble. The social justice movement has many godly aspects. But when meeting the natural needs of people where our Jesus stops—when we fail to address the spiritual needs—we’ve stripped Him of all His true life-changing power.

Deception No. 2: Postmodern King

“What is truth?” Pontius Pilate’s infamous query has never been more pertinent than to today’s culture. The postmodern movement has discarded absolute truth, along with the truth of who Jesus is. The Postmodern Jesus is often blended with Buddha and other “spiritual teachers” of antiquity. Postmodern Jesus had some good stuff to say: Be nice to one another. Respect your elders. Work hard. Pray. This is nothing more than humanistic religion that denies the power of God.

Postmodern Jesus is a good spiritual leader, offering sage advice for each of our own spiritual journeys along whatever path we choose to take. Even when specifics of Christ’s teachings are black and white, Postmodern Jesus followers feel justified in picking and choosing the truth by which they live.

Jesus is truth (John 14:6). He said He is the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Him. You don’t get much more absolute than that.

C.S. Lewis had some poignant words for the Postmodern Jesus: “A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. ... Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. ... Let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

Jesus brings Good News. The bad news about the Postmodern Jesus is that the buffet-style, choose-your-own-spiritual-truth approach does not offer eternal life. By contrast,

Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the Living God, Emmanuel, offers life for anyone who chooses Him.

Deception No. 3: Liberal Lamb

On several occasions, Jesus professed the power of love and forgiveness. He even ate and communed with “sinners.” But a misapplication of this universal love for God’s children gave birth to the Liberal Jesus.

Recent years have seen an escalation of sin being justified by believers in the Liberal Jesus. The distortion of “Judge not, that you be not judged” (Matt. 7:1) is used as a weapon to silence those who call sin sin.

In the Old and New Testaments, God commanded men and women who were aligned with His purposes to shine the light of the gospel into the darkness. From prophets to apostles to God-chasing believers, the Holy Spirit has used countless Christians to decry sin and call their brothers and sisters back from the brink of disaster.

Throughout Scripture, believers are charged with exercising righteous judgment, starting, of course, with ourselves (Ps. 37:30; Matt. 7:4-5; John 7:24; 1 Cor. 6:2-3). Remember, while Jesus ate with the “sinners” of His day, that was only half of the equation. He loved them enough to meet them where they were, but He loved them too much to leave them wallowing in their sin that leads to eternal death.

Jesus showed mercy to the woman caught in the very act of adultery (John 8:2-11), for example, but then immediately commanded her to go and sin no more. After He called the thieving tax collector Zacchaeus from the crowd and dined with him (Luke 19:1-10), Jesus inspired a repentant and wholly transformed heart that caused him to repay everything he stole many times over. This two-step method is crucial not only to understanding Christ’s own ministry but also to learning how we should approach outreach ministry.

The Liberal Lamb would have exhorted the adulterous woman to be careful not to get caught next time. Liberal Jesus would have shared a nice meal with Zacchaeus and patted him on the back, “accepting” him as he was. As with all of the hijacked Jesus models, Liberal Jesus is completely devoid of spiritually transformative power.

Pulling once again from Lewis’ brilliant mind: “We all want progress, but if you’re on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; in that case, the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive.”

Unlike the Liberal Jesus, Christ calls people back from the depths of their own spiritual death march and reclaims them from the pit of sin. As ones who have already heard His voice and answered His call to walk the narrow path, we are exhorted in Scripture to speak the truth in love. Christ commanded us to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matt. 22:39). Although the inoffensive, tolerant “love” of Liberal Jesus may seem kinder on the surface, true love and kindness lead sinners to repentance and redemption in Him.

Deception No. 4: Conservative Shepherd

After decades of influence from the Moral Majority and similar movements, “Christian” and “conservative” are often joined at the hip in popular parlance. While many of the policies espoused by such movements do seem to mirror Christ’s teachings, there are some treacherous pitfalls that can threaten the church from without and within.

Palm Sunday celebrates Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem at the start of what is now called Holy Week. Countless Jews greeted Him shouting, “Hosanna!” Their praises and actions are rife with symbolism. Just days later, though, Jesus was arrested and tried before an angry mob, then crucified and buried on what we call Good Friday.

How did the crowds turn from shouting “Hosanna!” to “Crucify Him!” so quickly? They wanted Him to be something he wasn’t: a Conservative Shepherd who liberated His followers from government oppression.

The Jews of Jesus’ time believed that the Messiah would be a military conqueror to achieve a final victory over their enemies. Although Scripture tells us that Jesus will return in this role at the Second Coming, they missed the fact that a deeper restoration was needed first, the healing of the rift that—despite God’s covenants with Israel—had not been fully mended since the fall of man. Ironically, it was this very rejection of Christ’s spiritual kingship that facilitated the crucifixion that led to that restoration.

What they missed was that Jesus didn’t come to change the natural government, but rather to change the hearts of men and their relationship with the Father. Natural government would change as a result.

With that said, there are several issues in our day that offer a clear moral choice. On those issues, Christians should stand up and make their voices heard. But without wisdom and discernment, another potential pitfall emerges.

Many followers of the hijacked Conservative Jesus like to hurl judgments at people practicing sin. While the sentiment behind their fervor may well be spiritually and morally sound, the hostile communication method is unlikely to persuade them to believe the truth.

The Conservative Shepherd is essentially the inverse of the Liberal Lamb. The Conservative Shepherd, like the Pharisees of Jesus’ day, zeroes in on the “go and sin no more” teaching, forgetting entirely Christ’s mercy and grace. Jesus took the Pharisees to task more than once for their hypocrisy-riddled, holier-than-thou mentality. Just as the Liberal Lamb elevates “love” at the expense of “truth,” the false Conservative

Shepherd often neglects “love” in its relentless pursuit of “truth.” Christ embodies both.

The True and Living Jesus

Facets of the real Jesus can be found in most of the above perversions of Christ’s character and message, but His true identity is far beyond any of those teachings. The Social Justice Warrior, proponents say, came to change the world’s economic systems. Christ came to change hearts. The false paradigm of a Postmodern King offers a flexible definition of personal, relative truth. Christ is the living incarnation of Truth. The false idea of a Liberal Lamb is all about tolerant, inoffensive acceptance. Christ brings life-changing love. The false legalistic view of the Conservative Shepherd looks down the nose at those “less spiritual” and seeks to mandate obedience to Christ through laws. Christ came with the law of love.

Just as it was 2,000 ago, the world is full of hurting people desperate for something real. Jesus has the answers, but many have exchanged the truth for lies. As it was for the Samaritan woman (John 4:5-26), who continually made the arduous journey for the temporary relief of the well water, a false Jesus can never fully satiate our deepest thirst. Only the Living Water can do that—only the true and living Jesus.

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