

Is the Americanization of Jesus Veiling Our Eyes From Truly Knowing Him?

It is quite an education when I consider the degree of anger and hostility I get from "Christians" when I simply point out the ethics that Jesus taught, you know, "red letter" stuff, like, love your enemies, do good to them who spitefully use you, etc. People will dodge, dance, resist, resent, fight, attack, slander and any number of other lovely "Christian" behaviors for the right to cling to retributive justice and other unbiblical and ungodly beliefs, especially when Jesus' ethics challenge their own. Once when dealing with an elder's wife on an issue, I pointed to what Jesus said (in context, properly exegeted), in her own "red letter" Bible, that was contrary to what she was believing, clinging to and fighting me about. Her exact words to me: 'My Jesus is not like that.' Precisely, that is the problem." –Dr. Stephen Crosby

The church presents Christ as the therapist, the banker, the philosopher, the friend, the hippie, the social activist, the look-the-other-way zero-accountability spiritual figure.

Why are the majority of people in the West so confused or deceived about who Jesus really is? Why do they seem to have so little depth or spiritual substance in their lives? Why can't these people's Christianity go beyond, "Jesus said, 'do not judge'?" Is it not in large part due to the distorted message of Him that our pulpits, our preachers and our churches are presenting? Is it not for the lack of example we've had in many Christian leaders? Similarly, the reason for much of today's current moral and cultural malaise stems from the church's distorted message of the Christ.

The image of Jesus for many professing Christians has been

shaped by the society around them. Unless you have an intimate relationship with the Holy One and His Word, the image you have of Him will be distorted. It will resemble the pop culture you live in and what the people of that culture worship. In the West, self is god. Corruptible man is worshipped. Humanism rules. And this is what we see in much of today's church.

If a professing believer does not want to give up his carnal, sinful lifestyle and adhere to the Lord's ways, he can just create an image of God that makes room for his sinful lifestyle. It is a very subtle deception that comforts and consoles him in his carnality and sin by saying things like, "God knows my heart," or "God understands my struggles." These types of comments, however, are usually made as a way of defending his lifestyle and justifying his carnal appetites. Is the Jesus you serve a product of your own desires patterned after this world, or is He the true presence of the Living Word of God in your life?

For example, divorce is now a rampant part of our Western culture, and the divorce rate in the church is nearly equal to that in the world. Many professing Christians find an unscriptural excuse to leave their spouses, and, in contradiction to the will of God, they forsake the vows they once made. And now that our culture is deteriorating to levels of sexual anarchy, professing Christians are claiming that one can also be gay and be a Christian. This is what happens when professing Christians flow with the spirit of the world. The image of God in them changes.

Emil Durkheim, the classic father of sociology, wrote extensively about totemism. Totemism is derived from the word "totem," which is a natural object or an animate being, such as an animal or bird, assumed to be the emblem of a clan, family or group. It can be an object or a natural phenomenon that a family considers itself to be closely related to; a totem serves as a distinctive mark of that group or family.

Totemism is the belief in the kinship of groups or individuals having a common totem and the rituals, taboos, and practices associated with such a belief.

Durkheim described totemism as the human tendency to form a conception of God in our own image. He said that oftentimes human beings, whether they are jungle tribes or sophisticated city dwellers, will take the values and traditions that they admire most about themselves and project them onto a totem. Eventually, they stand in awe of that totem and end up worshipping an incarnation of the things they love about themselves. This is what people do with the image of God. We create an image of a god whom we can relate to and who cares about the same things we care about.

During the days of Moses, Israel was living in an environment that worshipped images of animals and creeping things and so a golden calf was fashioned from the people's gold and worshipped (Ex. 32). "Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things" (Rom. 1:22-23). Their culture influenced and shaped their image of God. If you don't stay in God's presence and in God's Word, being a doer of it, the same thing could happen to you.

Beware of idolatry and changing the image of an incorruptible God into corruptible man.

In the West, worshipping golden images of animals and insects is not as prominent. As I stated, we worship something more subtle: self.

The fewer preconceptions we bring from the outside to the reading of the gospels, the more clearly we shall see Him as He really is. It is all too easy to believe in a Jesus who is largely a construction of our own imagination—an inoffensive Person whom no one could dislike or disapprove of, and

certainly whom no one would ever crucify.

But the Jesus we meet in the Gospels is far from being an inoffensive person. On the contrary, He caused offense quite frequently. Even His loyal followers found Him to be offensive at times, even disconcerting. He upset all established notions of religious propriety.

An inaccurate, distorted and unbiblical view of Jesus is a big reason why many pastors fail to confront sin in the church and speak of the evils in our society.

When asked why pastors don't speak out against the evils in our nation and government, one influential pastor said, "I think one reason is a lot of Christian leaders have the wrong idea about Jesus. They see Jesus as this little, wimpy guy who walked around plucking daisies and eating birdseed and saying nice things, but never doing anything controversial.

"The fact is, Jesus did confront his culture with truth—and he ended up being crucified because of it. I believe it's time for pastors to say, 'You know, I don't care about controversy; I don't care whether I'm going to lose church members; I don't care about building a big church. I'm going to stand for truth, regardless of what happens.'"

At times, the greatest love we can demonstrate is in rebuke. Conversely, at times, the greatest cruelty we can demonstrate is in never confronting sin or evil.

"Nothing can be more cruel than the tenderness that consigns another to their sin. Nothing can be more compassionate than the severe rebuke that calls a brother back from the path of sin." —Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Jesus said what He meant and meant what He said. If you read His words assuming otherwise, you are not encountering the real Jesus.

This is an excerpt from the fourth book of a compelling tetralogy called *The Real Jesus*. {eoa}