

Unwrapping Jesus

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As a writer, I have the wonderful privilege of researching and meditating on one topic for months at a time. A recent project allowed me to focus on the grandest subject of all: Jesus. Growing up in the Church, I learned His name as soon as I learned the names of my family members. But now, as an adult, what did I truly think about Him? Which childhood impressions had been confirmed and which ones overturned?

As I reflect on what I learned in the process of writing *The Jesus I Never Knew*, I have come up with a “top ten” list. It begins with number 10 and works upward.

10. Jesus was a Jew.

I knew that, of course. But the more I studied Jesus, the more I realized that His humanity had receded far away. Every week in church I would repeat the creed, which, significantly, hustles through Jesus’ life. “. . . Born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate,” it says. Did anything happen in the interval between birth and death? For me, as for many others raised in the Christian tradition, the man who walked the dusty roads of Palestine had been all but lost. I knew Christ – “Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made” – but not Jesus, or Rabbi Jeshua bar-Joseph, the Jew from Nazareth.

Jesus’ true-blue Jewishness leaps out from Matthew’s very first sentence, which introduces Him as “the son of David, the son of Abraham.” Roughly, that might parallel an American politician being introduced as “the son of Abraham Lincoln, the son of George Washington.” Circumcised as a baby, Jesus attended religious festivals in Jerusalem as a young man, and as an adult He worshiped in the synagogue and temple. Even His controversies with other Jews, such as the Pharisees, underscored the fact that they expected Him to share their values and act more like them.

Growing up, I did not know a single Jew. I do now. I know something of their culture: the close ties that keep sacred holidays alive even for families who no longer believe in their meaning; the passionate arguments that at first unsettled me but soon attracted me as a style of personal engagement; the respect, even reverence, for legalism amid a society that mainly values autonomy; the ability to link arms and dance and sing and laugh even when the world offers scant reason for celebration. This was the culture Jesus grew up in, a Jewish culture. Yes, He changed it, but always from His starting point as a Jew.

9. Yet Jesus did not act like a Jew.

The very architecture of the temple expressed Jewish belief in a ladder of hierarchy reaching higher and higher toward God. Gentiles and “halfbreeds” like the Samaritans could enter the outer Court of the Gentiles; a wall separated them from the next partition, which admitted Jewish women. Jewish men could proceed one stage farther, and then only priests could enter the sacred areas. The society was, in effect, a religious caste system based on steps toward holiness, and the Pharisees’ scrupulosity reinforced the system daily.

In the midst of this tight legalistic system, Jesus appeared, with no qualms about socializing with children or sinners or even Samaritans. He touched, or was touched by, the “unclean:” those with leprosy, the deformed, a hemorrhaging woman, the lunatic and possessed. Although Levitical laws prescribed a day of purification after touching a sick person, Jesus conducted mass healings in which He touched scores; He never concerned Himself with the rules of defilement after contact with the sick or even the dead. Indeed, Jesus turned upside down the accepted wisdom of the day. Pharisees believed that touching an unclean person polluted

the one who touched. Yet when Jesus touched a person with leprosy, Jesus did not become soiled – the leprosy became clean. When an immoral woman washed Jesus' feet, she went away forgiven and transformed. When Jesus defied custom to enter a pagan's house, the pagan's servant was healed. As Walter Wink puts it, "The contagion of holiness overcomes the contagion of uncleanness." In short, Jesus moved the emphasis from God's holiness (exclusive) to God's mercy (inclusive).

Jesus' attitude convicts me today, because I sense a movement in the reverse direction. The church is becoming more and more politicized. I share a deep concern for our society, and obviously Christians need to be a moral voice. In doing so, though, we must follow Jesus' example, "loving the sinner while hating the sin." I am struck by the power of mercy as demonstrated by Jesus, who came for the sick and not the well, for sinners and not for the righteous. I spent half my life rebelling against the legalism of my childhood; when I tasted the first draught of the Living Water offered by Jesus, I knew I was changed forever.

8. Jesus lost the "Culture Wars."

Not long ago I addressed the topic "Culture Wars" before a large gathering that was tilted toward the liberal Democratic persuasion and included a strong minority of Jews. I had been selected as the token evangelical Christian on a panel that included the presidents of the Disney Channel and Warner Brothers, as well as the president of Wellesley College and Anita Hill's personal attorney.

To prepare, I went through the Gospels for guidance, only to be reminded how unpolitical Jesus was. Today, each time an election rolls around, Christians debate whether this or that candidate is "God's man" for the White House. Projecting myself back into Jesus' time, I had difficulty imagining Him pondering whether Tiberius, Octavius, or Julius Caesar was "God's man" for the empire.

When my turn came to speak, I said that the man I follow, a Jew from the first century, had also been involved in a culture war. He went up against a rigid religious establishment and a pagan empire. The two powers, often at odds, conspired together to eliminate Him. His response? Not to fight, but to give His life for these His enemies, and to point to that gift as proof of His love. Among the last words He said before death were, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

After the panel, a television celebrity came up to me whose name every reader would recognize. "I've got to tell you, what you said stabbed me right in the heart," he said. "I was prepared to dislike you because I dislike all right-wing Christians, and I assumed you were one. I don't follow Jesus – I'm a Jew. But when you told about Jesus forgiving His enemies, I realized how far from that spirit I am. I fight my enemies, especially the right-wingers. I don't forgive them. I have much to learn from the spirit of Jesus."

7. Jesus was a poor salesman.

Sometimes I wonder how Jesus would have fared in this day of mass media and high-tech ministry. I can't picture Him worrying about the details of running a large organization. I can't see Him letting some make-up artist improve His looks before a TV appearance. And I have a hard time imagining the fundraising letters Jesus might write. Jesus, who had manifest supernatural powers, tended to downplay them. Seven times in Mark's Gospel He told a healed person, "Tell no one!" When crowds pressed around Him, He fled to solitude.

I never sensed Jesus twisting a person's arm. Rather, He stated the consequences of a choice, then threw the decision back to the other party. For example, He once answered a wealthy man's question with uncompromising words, then let him walk away. Mark pointedly adds this comment about the man who rejected Jesus' advice, "Jesus looked at him and loved him." In short, Jesus showed an incredible respect for human freedom. As Elton Trueblood has observed, the major symbols of invitation that Jesus used had a severe, even offensive quality: the yoke of burden, the cup of suffering, the towel of servanthood. "Take up your cross and follow Me," He said, in the least manipulative invitation that has ever been given.

6. No one knows what Jesus looked like.

After spending time in seminary libraries browsing through the thousands of books on Jesus, I found a strange thing: with this preponderance of scholarship, we still lack certain basic information about Jesus. The four Gospels skip over nine-tenths of His life. The facts of biography considered essential to modern readers simply did not concern the Gospel writers.

We also know nothing specific about Jesus' shape or stature or eye color, and thus, as a writer, I could not begin where I normally begin in reporting on a person – by describing what He looked like. The first semi-realistic portraits of Jesus did not come until the fifth century, and these were pure speculation; until then, the Greeks had portrayed Him as a young, beardless figure resembling the mythical god Apollo.

I once showed to a class several dozen art slides portraying Jesus in a variety of forms – African, Korean, Chinese – and then asked the class to describe what they thought Jesus looked like. Virtually everyone suggested He was tall (unlikely for a first-century Jew), most said handsome, and no one said overweight.

Yet in all the Bible I can find only one physical description of sorts, a prophecy written hundreds of years before Christ's birth. Here is Isaiah's portrayal, in Chapter 53, a passage that the New Testament applies to the life of Jesus:

Just as there were many who were appalled at Him – His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and His form marred beyond human likeness. . . . He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to Him, nothing in His appearance that we should desire Him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces He was despised, and we esteemed Him not.

Evidently our glamorized representations of Jesus say more about us than about Him.

5. You might not have wanted Jesus at your backyard barbecue.

In writing a book about Jesus, one impression struck me more forcefully than any other: we have tamed Him. The Jesus I learned about as a child was sweet and inoffensive, the kind of person whose lap you want to climb on, Mister Rogers with a beard. Indeed, Jesus did have qualities of gentleness and compassion that attracted little children. Mister Rogers, however, He assuredly was not.

I realized this fact when I studied the Sermon on the Mount. “Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the persecuted. Blessed are those who mourn.” These sayings have a soft, proverbial ring to them – unless you happen to know someone poor, persecuted, or mourning. The homeless huddling over heating grates in our major cities, the tortured prisoners whose pictures are distributed by Amnesty International, the families of the Oklahoma City bombing victims we saw interviewed on television – who would think of calling them blessed?

In all the movies about Jesus' life, surely the most provocative – and perhaps the most accurate – portrayal of the Sermon on the Mount appears in a low-budget BBC production entitled “Son of Man.” The director, Dennis Potter, sets the Sermon on the Mount against a background of violence and chaos. Roman soldiers have just invaded a Galilean village to exact vengeance for some trespass against the empire. They have strung up Jewish men of fighting age, shoved their hysterical wives to the ground, even speared babies in order to “teach these Jews a lesson.” Into that tumultuous scene of blood and tears and wailing for the dead strides Jesus with eyes ablaze. “I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those that persecute you,” He shouts above the groans:

I say it's easy to love your own brother, to love those who love you. Even tax collectors do that! You want Me to congratulate you for loving your own kinsmen? No, Love your enemy. Love the man who would kick you and spit at you. Love the soldier who would drive his sword in your belly. Love the brigand who robs and tortures you. Listen! I tell you, it is hard to follow Me. What I'm saying to you hasn't been said since the world began!

You can imagine the villagers' response to such unwelcome advice. The Sermon on the Mount did not soothe them; it infuriated them. I came away from my study of Jesus both comforted and terrified. Few people felt comfortable around Jesus; those who did were the type no one else felt comfortable around. The Jesus I met in the Gospels was anything but tame.

4. Jesus is not the Church.

Many people who reject Jesus are rejecting not Jesus, but a distortion of Him as presented by the Church. To our everlasting shame, the watching world judges Jesus by a Church whose history includes the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Holocaust, Conquistadores in Latin America, and a slave ship called the Good Ship Jesus.

In order to get to know Jesus, I had to strip away layers of dust and grime applied by the Church itself. In my case, the image of Jesus was obscured by the racism, intolerance, and petty legalism of fundamentalist churches in the South. A Russian or a European Catholic confronts a very different restoration process. "For not only dust, but also too much gold can cover up the true figure," wrote Hans Kung about his own search. Many abandon the quest entirely; rebuffed by the Church, they never make it to Jesus.

I often wish that we could somehow set aside Church history, remove the Church's many layers of interpretation, and encounter the words of the Gospels for the first time. Not everyone would accept Jesus – they did not in His own day – but at least people would not reject Him for the wrong reasons.

Once I was able to cut through the fog still clinging from my own upbringing, my opinion of Jesus changed remarkably. Brilliant, untamed, tender, creative, merciful, slippery, loving, irreducible, paradoxically humble – Jesus stands up to scrutiny. He is who I want my God to be.

3. Yet the Church is Jesus.

What I have just longed for, nonetheless, is not only impossible; it is unscriptural. Jesus planned from the beginning to die so that we His Church could take His place. He stayed just long enough to gather around Him followers who could carry the message to others. Killing Jesus, says Walter Wink, was like trying to destroy a dandelion seedhead by blowing on it.

The Church is where God lives. What Jesus brought to a few – healing, grace, the good-news message of God's love – the Church can now bring to all. "Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies," He explained, "it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds."

"It is for your good that I am going away," Jesus told His disciples, who had the same question. "Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you." I find it much easier to accept the fact of God incarnating in Jesus of Nazareth than in the people who attend my local church – and in me. Yet that is what we are asked to believe; that is how we are asked to live. Jesus played His part and then left. Now it is up to us, the body of Christ.

2. Catholics are better at calendars than Protestants.

The church I grew up in skipped past the events of Holy Week in a rush to hear the cymbal sounds of Easter. We never held a service on Good Friday. We celebrated the Lord's Supper only once a quarter. Roman Catholics did not believe in the Resurrection, I was told, which explained why Catholic girls wore crosses "with the little man on them." They celebrated Mass daily, a symptom of their fixation with death. We Protestants were different. We saved our best clothes, our rousing hymns, and our few sanctuary decorations for Easter.

When I began to study theology and Church history, I found that my church was wrong about the Catholics, who believed in Easter as strongly as we did. From the Gospels I also learned that, unlike my church, the biblical record

slows down rather than speeds up when it gets to Holy Week. The Gospels, said one early Christian commentator, are chronicles of Jesus' final week with extended introductions.

The author and preacher Tony Campolo delivers a stirring sermon adapted from an elderly black pastor at his church in Philadelphia. "It's Friday, but Sunday's Comin'" is the title of the sermon, and once you know the title you know the whole sermon. In a cadence that increases in tempo and in volume, Campolo contrasts how the world looked on Friday – when the forces of evil won over the forces of good, when every friend and disciple fled in fear, when the Son of God died on a cross – with how it looked on Easter Sunday. The disciples who lived through both days, Friday and Sunday, learned that when God seems most absent He may be closest of all; when God looks most powerless He may be most powerful; when God looks most dead He may be coming back to life. They learned never to count God out.

The sermon skips one day, though. In a real sense, we live our lives on Saturday, the day in between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Can we trust that God can make something holy and beautiful and good out of a world that includes Bosnia and Rwanda and inner-city ghettos in the richest nation on earth? Human history grinds on, between the time of promise and fulfillment. It's Saturday on planet Earth; will Sunday ever come?

Perhaps that is why the authors of the Gospels devoted so much more space to Jesus' last week than to the several weeks when He was making resurrection appearances. They knew that the history to follow would often resemble Saturday, the in-between day, more than Sunday, the day of rejoicing. It is a good thing to remember that in the cosmic drama, we live out our days on Saturday, the day with no name.

1. Jesus saves my faith.

"Why am I a Christian?" I sometimes ask myself, and to be perfectly honest, the reasons reduce to two: (1) the lack of good alternatives and (2) Jesus. Martin Luther encouraged his students to flee the hidden God and run to Christ, and I now know why. If I use a magnifying glass to examine a fine painting, the object in the center of the glass stays crisp and clear, while around the edges the view grows increasingly distorted. For me, Jesus has become the focal point. I learned, in the process of writing this book, to keep the magnifying glass of my faith focused on Jesus. I tend to spend a lot of time pondering unanswerable questions such as the problem of pain or providence versus free will. When I do so, everything becomes fuzzy. But if I look at Jesus, clarity is restored.