



But What Kind of a Jesus Is He?

When you say “Jesus,” whom do you picture in your mind’s eye? Years ago, when the argument about a “center” of the Old Testament was hot, Gerhard von Rad wrote, “Of course, it can be said that Jahweh is the focal point of the Old Testament. This is, however, simply the beginning of the whole question: what kind of Jahweh is he?”* And what kind of Jesus is it that stands at the center of the New Testament? It depends, of course, on which texts you read—precisely von Rad’s point with regard to God in the Old Testament.

And, of course, if we include the Jesus of Christian faith and Christian tradition, beyond the New Testament, the pictures become all the more diverse. Is this a good thing or a bad thing? Is there any “real” Jesus? Does anything go? Are there any criteria?

There are, of course, the criteria developed in Chalcedonian orthodoxy, the Jesus of the Nicene Creed—Jesus as “true God from true God,” yet also true human, born of Mary, crucified, suffered, and died, together in one person. That definition has held for a long time, but even it is called into question, frequently by those who have sought to separate the “Jesus of the Gospels” from the “Christ of the Epistles,” and more recently by churches in developing countries—cultures apart from the Western philosophical tradition—who wonder whether they have to become Greeks before they can be Christians.

So, back to our pictures of Jesus. Are some preferred? Are some just wrong? How would we know? Presumably, the Jesus of a biblical passage—any biblical passage—needs to have a legitimate place in our consideration, even if it presents a picture other than the Jesus of our usual proclamation (cursing the fig tree?).

But what of extrabiblical Jesus pictures? Are some better than others? Are some out of bounds? Should, say, Abelard’s Jesus of moral influence find a renewed place among us, along with similar emphases on Jesus’ obedience and ours, on Jesus’ example of transforming love that might actually be seen among his followers? Though probably rightly condemned as an insufficient theory of the atonement, such understandings of Jesus seem to offer an important counter-voice in an age of amorality and narcissism. Jesus *is* a prophet of repentance in the New Testament, a challenger of the status quo, a thorn in the flesh of the religious establishment, a friend of sinners. Jesus does call his followers to a “righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees” (Matt 5:20). All this seems worthy of mention, at least along with our proclamation of the saving death of Jesus.

*Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) 415.

And what of pictures farther removed from biblical narrative? What of the tortured (and possibly syphilitic?) Jesus of Grünewald's Isenheim Altar? Or the unmistakable images of Jesus suffering from AIDS found now in some African churches? What of Edwina Sandys's image of "Christa"—Christ crucified as a woman? Or, in more popular culture, the images in *Jesus Christ Superstar* or *The Passion of Christ*?

Thinking back on my childhood, what of the sweet Jesus of the Bible story books? Or the altogether white Jesus of the bulletin covers, or the way-too-clean shepherd of the stained-glass windows? Or the Jesus of radio's *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, which played ethereal music in the background every time he spoke—a kind of audio-red-letter edition of Jesus' life? (No wonder I went to seminary as an unknowing Docetist—which I clearly did.)

There are many Jesuses out there! At their best, we could consider such latter-day portrayals sermons on the text of Jesus, which quite legitimately can—indeed, must—move beyond simply repeating the tradition; but, of course, in art as in preaching, there are better sermons and worse sermons—as for me, I'll take Grünewald over Sallman, and the African Christ with AIDS over the clean, white shepherd of my Sunday School days.

Like sermons, images of Jesus need to do one thing—point to the text, point to the Christ, point to the Jesus (or even the Jesuses) of Scripture, just as Grünewald's John the Baptist points unceasingly at his crucified Lord. An image that permits itself to become too captive to contemporary notions (a too-Western Jesus? a Che Guevara Jesus? a Terminator Jesus? a too-warm-and-fuzzy Jesus? a too-Docetic Jesus? a too-prosperous Jesus?) becomes an idea rather than a person, an ideology rather than a gospel; and that sermon fails.

No one picture of Jesus is sufficient, not even in the gospels. I write this during the week of Transfiguration, and it occurs to me that one of the problems with Peter, James, and John on that mountain was that they wanted to hold on to that *one* image too firmly and too quickly. Ah, the full glory of God in Christ at last! But they didn't know yet what God's glory would come to mean in Jesus. They didn't know that neither they nor Jesus could get to glory without going through Calvary. They needed another image.

No one picture of Jesus will suffice. And some are better than others, some more timely than others. The creative pastor will (critically!) use a variety—within Scripture and beyond—to help the congregation and the world be appropriately surprised week after week: "Oh, *that's* Jesus!"

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