



The Real Jesus



Gary Wilkerson December 22, 2014

I believe it has never been more important for the church and the world to know the real Jesus. By “the real Jesus” I mean the only source able to satisfy every human need and longing, every desire to be loved, known and accepted, every hope to have a life of value, worth and purpose.

These things aren’t found in the world. Our culture is fully focused on *American Idol*-type fame, telling us we’ll be satisfied by money or good looks or popularity. We know differently as lovers of God—that our deepest desires can’t be satisfied by anything but Christ.

And yet knowing this, we in the church often try to reduce Jesus to our own image. Many of us want a Jesus who suits us—a right-wing Republican Jesus or a liberal-leaning Democratic Jesus. There is a black Jesus, a brown Jesus, a white Jesus whom I call the Holiday Inn Jesus—the one with blow-dried, blond hair who seems to float through the air.

When I speak of “the real Jesus,” I mean the One who satisfies every human hunger and thirst. He can’t be reduced to some limited conception because the Bible says Christ can only be known in his fullness. It takes the whole counsel of God—the full biblical picture—for us to receive, know and faithfully serve Jesus. “From his *fullness* we have all received, grace upon grace” (*John 1:16, my emphasis*). In short, we are able to walk in Christ’s grace only as we know him fully. Anything else is a diminished walk of faith.

John also says, “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him” (1:11). This speaks of Christ’s rejection by the Jews, but how much of our Lord do we ignore today? Do we emphasize some of his teachings over others because some are uncomfortable? To what degree have we not accepted Jesus in his fullness?

John says there are three real things about Jesus we have to know.

In the opening chapter of his gospel, John states there are three ways to know Jesus in his fullness: he is the real Word of God, the real *light* of God and the real *glory* of God.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). John’s main audience for his gospel was the Greek culture. That’s why he immediately identified Jesus as “the Word,” referring to the Greek term “logos.” Greeks had been examining this concept of logos for centuries, an idea that spoke of wisdom, knowledge, reason, the meaning of life, the philosophy of human existence. Now John challenged them:

“Do you really want to know the meaning of life, to understand all human purpose on this earth? The logos you search for is found in the literal Word of God—his Son, Jesus. Christ is the logos everyone hungers for! You seek knowledge, but logos— real, knowable wisdom and life—is fully expressed in Jesus.”

Most readers know me as a preacher of grace. Yet every important theological term I preach and write about—grace, love, the New Covenant—are all grounded in Jesus. You see, knowing Christ in his fullness means more than knowing a theological truth about him; it means allowing him to transform us into his likeness. We are not set free by an idea; Jesus is the One who sets us free, heals, cleanses and guides us, not just once but every

day through life.

When I was about twelve I overheard a newspaper reporter interviewing a Teen Challenge resident. She asked him, "What's different about this program? What does it offer that you wouldn't find at a secular treatment center?" The young man answered, "We get the Holy Ghost in the morning, Jesus in the afternoon and the Father at night." That response may sound canned today, but it didn't forty years ago. I remember the young man's excitement as he told her, "Teen Challenge is all about God. Only he can set me free this way. Only he can give me purpose and hope and make me happy. Lady, this is *real!*"

That's the very word John used to describe Jesus to the Greeks: *real*. "The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world" (1:9). The word "true" here is from the Greek "alethea," but John actually uses the word "altheonos," meaning "real." The Greeks thought "logos" was unknowable, but John told them, "God isn't hiding himself. He came to earth to live among us. The mystery of God has been revealed to you in Jesus!"

How exactly is this mystery revealed? Jesus chooses to make himself known to the world through his people. When John says Christ comes to dwell in us, the verb he uses means "tabernacle." Jesus "tabernacles" in us, just as God did in the Old Testament, his glory descending from heaven to dwell among his people. He chooses to make his home in us, making us—both individuals and congregations—the dwelling place of his glory.

This was a core truth for my father, David Wilkerson, who often said, "I don't want a visitation from God. I want a habitation." That truth came straight from John, who told the Greeks, "The logos is more than information, more than mental assent to an idea. It is God himself coming to dwell within you!"

John himself was transformed by Christ's fullness.

John and his brother, James, were disciples of John the Baptist, the fiery prophet with a national following. Working in their father's fishing business, the rough-and-tumble brothers acquired the nickname "sons of thunder." In other words, they didn't back down from much.

I've known some sons of thunder in my time. The wonderful ministry Victory Outreach reaches a lot of people from rough backgrounds, saints who might stay rough around the edges after they've come to Christ. It's as if some of them go from gang life to being in God's gang—unintimidated, speaking their minds, preaching boldly.

That was James and John. Even after following Jesus for some time, they wanted to call down fire from heaven to destroy those who rejected the gospel. Decades later, in writing his gospel account, John spoke of a transformation that took place within him. He now saw himself as "the beloved disciple," no longer the tough guy. He was telling the Greeks that Jesus was not just truth for head knowledge but truth for transformation of the heart.

Do you find yourself filling your head with knowledge about Jesus, yet you sense your heart isn't being changed? Are you nagged that your life is no different from day to day by the work of his Spirit in you? Jesus has come to tabernacle in you, to transform you by his presence. In that sense, the real Word is not just information but the living God who dwells in you.

Jesus is also the *real light* who illuminates, revealing all truth. Carter Conlon, pastor of Times Square Church, tells of an encounter he had at a conference where he preached passionately on the holiness of God. After his sermon, he sat down next to a man who said, "I don't agree with anything you preached." When Carter asked why, the man said, "My God would never raise his voice with me." Puzzled, Carter mentioned the biblical passage where Jesus took a whip into the holy temple to drive out the moneychangers. The man responded, "Yes, he did that, but that's not who Jesus is now."

Carter thought for a moment, then asked the man, "Tell me, friend—did your father yell at you growing up?" At that, the man dissolved. "My dad yelled at me all the time," he said through tears. Carter ministered grace and truth to the man, ending by saying gently, "There is no such thing as 'my God.' There is only one God, and he can't be yours or mine. We are *his*."

There are many camps within the Christian church. Some believers who grew up in harsh or violent homes accept only a teddy bear Jesus. Others who grew up in chaotic homes want a God of order who gives them legalistic boundaries. But our upbringing can't determine the full picture of the real Jesus. His real Word brings real light, showing us truth that sets us free. We have to be faithful to receive all of that light, not just the light we want to see.

John writes that when he saw the true light in Jesus, he knew it was real. The words he heard Christ preach and the works he saw him do satisfied his hunger and quenched his thirst. That's when he and his brother stopped following John the Baptist and began following Jesus.

Finally, John writes in his gospel of Christ's real glory.

"We have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). The Greek word for "glory" here is "doxa." It's the source behind the Doxology, the hymn that so many churches sing extolling God's manifold glory.

"Doxa" is actually John's translation of a Hebrew word "kavod," meaning weighty, substantive, intense, thick. This is what dwells in every follower of Christ: God's weighty, meaningful, passionate glory. His glory sets you apart—from lightness, from self-interest, from easy believism. That's how the world knows you exist for God. You don't just serve a Jesus who wants to make you happy; you serve the real Jesus, who has power to transform a life and make it meaningful, purposeful and fulfilling.

All of this opposes the glory of self. "The devil took [Jesus] to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their *glory* [doxa]" (Matthew 4:8). There are many glories in the world that call us to pursue them: reputation, affluence, influence. But the more we seek and receive of those glories, the less we receive of God's true glory—and the less of his glory shines from our lives.

This pull has crept into the church. Sometimes our worship can lean more toward showy performance and emotional experience than extolling God's glory and knowing his full, weighty presence. John rightly places God's glory even before his grace: "We have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). John points out that grace and truth are contained *within* Christ's glory; they proceed from it.

Yet many Christians live as if grace and truth are stopping points, the end-all of our walk with Jesus. They stop at knowing "positional truths," neglecting to go on in his fullness. But our lives are meant to express Jesus in all his glory—and that requires his transformation of us.

If we think we have it all together—that we have grasped God's grace fully, that no more is needed—we are stopping short of his glory. Don't let that happen in your life. Seek the real Jesus in his fullness—and receive the fullness of his grace and glory!

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