

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

NUMBER 82 - AUGUST 1999



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Jesus talk and Jesus pictures—helpful for some but not for all

“On the brink of the twenty-first century,” say Bill Easum and Tom Bandy in *Growing Spiritual Redwoods* (Abingdon, 1997), “‘Church Folks’ have a remarkably small ‘market share’ of the ‘Jesus Talk’ happening among the public. It is not that ‘Church Folks’ disagree with the ‘Jesus Talk’ going on around them, they just don’t hear it. They just don’t get it. They just can’t connect with it.”



Like Easum and Bandy, many other observers of the current church scene also find that personal talk about Jesus—not doctrinal talk about Christ—is essential for communicating the gospel to today’s non-churchgoers. Jesus talk seems especially important for reaching today’s younger people. Ironically, it tends to be heard from non-churchgoers more than from churchgoers.



A puzzled reaction

Easum and Bandy give an example. “At the conclusion of a consultation in a local church, the pastor drove Bill to the airport. ... In the midst of the idle conversation, the pastor paused, looked at Bill with a puzzled expression, and said, ‘During the seminar you mentioned several times the need for people to have a personal relationship with Jesus. What on earth did you mean by that?’”

Like that pastor I’m puzzled by a lot of the Jesus talk that I hear. Much of it turns me off even though I believe in Jesus Christ, yet it seems to be important or even essential to most other Christians. I’m fairly sure that a lot of the difference in our reactions comes from differences in our personalities and in our ways of understanding and expressing our spirituality. Our reactions to the Jesus pictures I wrote about in last month’s *Connections* also reflect these differences.



What a friend we have . . . ?

When people talk about having a personal relationship with Jesus, I’m never sure what they mean. Some say instead that Jesus is a friend, but that isn’t any clearer to me. The main scripture about friendship with Jesus



You are my friends if you do what I command you.

—John 15:14

doesn’t seem to describe a personal relationship. It’s simply about obeying. That baffles me.

I’m also baffled because I don’t see any way of experiencing the difference between God, the Holy Spirit, and Jesus in his spiritual form (the only form in which he is now available), yet to see Jesus as a friend I think I’d have to be able to see that difference.

What else does considering someone a friend require? For me, it’s knowing a good bit about the person—about his or her family, and activities, and interests. That can apply to Jesus, as from the Bible we know quite a bit about him. Being friends, however, also means liking some of the same activities and doing them together. Maybe we do that with Jesus when we do things we believe Jesus cares about, but relating like that doesn’t seem personal. Considering someone a friend also means feeling that he or she likes me and is open with me, and I don’t see any way of getting that impression from Jesus.



A friend I don’t see, touch, or hear from?

I sometimes hear Christians say they feel closer to Jesus than to any human friend or family member. That puzzles me, because unlike those human beings Jesus can’t be physically seen, touched, or heard, and to me those qualities seem essential for closeness. For me, feeling close to someone also requires talking (or writing) to each other often and getting clearly identifiable responses. Considering someone a friend also requires feeling that the relationship is mutual—that sometimes I take the initiative for getting together, while at other times he or she makes the first move. I don’t see those things happening between Jesus and anyone.

Maybe my understanding of friendship differs from most other people’s. Maybe Jesus pictures and Jesus talk fill some of the requirements of friendship for them but not for me. I suspect that’s it, but I keep wondering.

Although we're probably in the minority, I suspect that some other Christians are also puzzled when they hear talk about having a personal relationship with Jesus. Like me they may be reluctant to admit their puzzlement, because so often the unpuzzled (who tend to be more vocal than the puzzled, it seems to me) act as if the puzzled ones aren't real Christians. I'd rather not subject myself to that verdict because I'm pretty sure it's wrong. Because it seems so prevalent, however, I keep wondering every now and then about the reason for it.

We're not all alike

With regard to Jesus talk, Jesus pictures, and so many other aspects of our ways of understanding and expressing our beliefs, what helps some Christians turns others off. I believe recognizing that is very important.



I've gotten some helpful new insight into this subject from books I've come across in recent months. In last month's *Connections* I quoted from one of them, *Icons of American Protestantism*, edited by David Morgan, a Lutheran art professor. I



told how turned-off I am by the familiar "Head of Christ" picture by Warner Sallman, which many other Christians love.

In another of his books (*Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images*, University of California Press, 1998), Morgan further describes the valuable role that pictures of Jesus play for many Christians. Popular images of Jesus, Morgan finds, call forth meaning that goes beyond what scripture provides. Images like the Sallman "Head of Christ," Morgan reminds us, "portray a Savior whose appearance, though it is never described in the New Testament, is instantly recognized."

Protestants and Catholics both use images

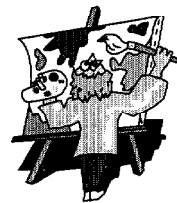
Much Roman Catholic spirituality has featured the use of religious images, but Protestants have tended to feel uneasy about using them. Often without realizing what they were doing, however, Protestants have used familiar pictures of Jesus to serve purposes quite similar to



those that statues and rosaries have served for Catholics. Even if the Protestants don't have the physical pictures on their walls, David Morgan finds, they keep the pictures prominently stored in their memories. Both Protestant and Catholic believers have developed the habit of seeing these pictures and statues as accurate illustrations of their beliefs.



Art critics tend to see familiar portrayals of Jesus as merely simple art for simple people, David Morgan notes, while theological critics more often object that devotional images shrink God to an idol or misrepresent what Jesus must have looked like. In Morgan's view, however, such criticisms are short-sighted. Images, he assures us, meet important needs of the devout. Such images perform valuable functions even if they also lead us astray by giving us the impression that Jesus looked like us.



Jesus pictures can help

- They remind us that Jesus is real

Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.
—Matthew 28:20

Religious pictures are important for our faith, Morgan points out, partly because they have a unique ability to make real what they depict. They remind us that Jesus lived on earth as a human being and that he still lives.

- They make what is abstract concrete



David Morgan finds that the practices, attitudes, and ideas we get from familiar religious images help us to bring together mind and matter, and thought and behavior. Because they are concrete and specific rather than abstract like ideas, pictures of Jesus help us to focus our attention on what Jesus is like and on becoming more like him. "The act of looking itself," says Morgan, "contributes to religious formation and, indeed, constitutes a powerful practice of belief."

- They remind us of what really matters

Religious images, Morgan explains, help us by giving a concrete form to what is valuable, strength-

giving, and timeless, in contrast to what is unimportant, threatening, and temporary but is often more prominent in our daily surroundings. "Keeping chaos and the wasteland at bay," says Morgan, "is very much what devotional images are about in modern American religious culture."



▪ **They reaffirm what we believe about the world**

The sameness and the widespread presence of familiar pictures of Jesus, Morgan observes, "will seem militantly boring to those for whom the imagery signifies an alien world, but it is deeply reassuring for the image's adherents. Believers return to the same imagery over and over precisely because it reaffirms what they want to take for granted about the world."



▪ **They help us cope**

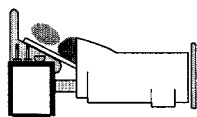
Pictures of Jesus help many believers to cope with a world that seems oppressive or indifferent, Morgan points out, and for most people, coping with that world has much higher priority than trying to resist or change it. The power of religious images, Morgan explains, comes largely from their role in helping us to solve problems and to cope with those that can't be solved. "Sacred images," Morgan finds, "are those that make belief work."



▪ **They speak a language that's easy to grasp**



Devotional images become popular, according to Morgan, when they speak to the believer "in a voice that is not grandiose, imposing, authoritative, or impersonal, but tailored to the stature of the believer's life." Unlike verbal statements that we may feel are over our heads or don't relate to our experience, visual images speak in a language that reaches us. We can grasp the meaning without having to get it from words, in fact, and it can reach us at a level below consciousness. This effect of visual images can be especially valuable when we're ill or under stress. So can the effect of merely being able to utter the name "Jesus," without having to think about all that Jesus' role as the Christ means.



▪ **They strengthen our memory**

Like ritual, images use our senses and thus our bodies to fix beliefs and experiences in our memory, both as individuals and as groups. "All devotional practices—whether the high ritual of Holy Communion or the display of devotional images in one's bedroom—are forms of collective memory," Morgan finds, and memory plays a valuable role in faith. It not only reminds us of ways in which God has been especially real to us individually in the past. Memory also reminds us of who we are as a religious community that has existed since long before our own lifetime.



▪ **They personalize our relationship with Jesus**

Seeing a picture of Jesus can add a personal aspect to a person's relationship with him. Envisioning him rather than just knowing about him helps many people personalize their relation to him.



When believers look at a picture of Jesus, many see what David Morgan calls "a look that touches." That visual touch evidently replaces the physical touch that is an important part of many friendships with human beings.

Jesus talk evidently helps to personalize our relationship with Jesus in a similar way. When we use only words like "savior" and "Christ," we may think of Jesus only as a doctrine or a concept. Using a personal name for speaking to him and about him can help us connect with him as a person.

Important needs in today's world

When we consider these ways in which Jesus talk and Jesus pictures strengthen many believers' faith, it's not surprising that Jesus talk and Jesus pictures are used so often by both churchgoers and non-churchgoers. Besides, in today's high-tech, often impersonal world, the importance of personal relationships is becoming more and more apparent. It's no wonder that having a personal relationship with Jesus is what matters most to many Christians. And with the importance of multi-media communication to today's generations who have grown up with TV,



computers, and the Internet, it's not surprising that visual images of Jesus have become more important than ever for communicating the gospel.

One size doesn't fit all of us



"One size fits all" doesn't apply to

I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it for the sake of the gospel.

— 1 Corinthians 9:22

being the church in today's world. The need for variety in worship, teaching styles, and opportunities for ministry keeps becoming more and more apparent.



In a future *Connections* I'll have more to say about how some churches are tailoring their activities to fit people's different styles of spirituality. Here's how the pastor of one such church puts it. "We used to think the Henry Ford method was all we needed. Ford said he offered whatever kind of car anyone wanted as long as it was black. But the Baskin Robbins method is what's necessary now—thirty-one flavors, with new flavors replacing old ones all the time." That's what it takes now, to keep reaching new people with the timeless gospel.

Barbara

A P.S. to the June *Connections* . . .



While noting the ways in which churches are lagging behind other institutions in using electronic communications, it's important to recognize the ways in which many churches are using electronic media. Many local congregations have web sites telling what they offer, and so do several denominations. The United Methodist Church's web site at www.umc.org, for example, is not only full of useful information. It also provides opportunities for chatting and for sending opinions about important current issues to UM agencies.



Where we're mainly behind seems to be in using electronic media in local-church worship and teaching, and for communication between congregations, between the denomination and its congregations, and between congregations and their members.

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