

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Picturing Jesus

Do you have a mental picture of Jesus? If so, what is it like, and where did it come from? Some of our mental pictures, like some paintings and printed pictures that claim to be Jesus, seem very different from what the earthly Jesus must have really looked like.



Especially if we're Anglo-American, many of us think of Jesus as looking a lot like ourselves and the other people at our typical worship services,



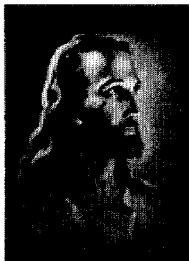
Sunday School classes, workplaces, family gatherings, and leisure activities. That may be largely because many paintings and drawings that claim to be Jesus make him look Anglo-American.

Portraying Jesus that way gives a false picture of him. More important, it can contribute to the unjust domination of other racial/ethnic groups by Anglo-Americans. Claiming Jesus as part of that group makes other groups look less valuable.

Picturing Jesus as looking like ourselves can be helpful in some ways but unhelpful or even harmful in others. It can help us remember that Jesus is accessible to us and cares about us, but it can keep us from remembering that Jesus also cares about the people who don't look or act like us.



A fresh look at a famous picture



An intriguing book that I've recently come across throws a lot of light—including some disturbing light—on this subject. The book discusses a famous painting of Jesus that furnishes many Christians' mental picture of him.

David Morgan, a Lutheran who chairs the art department of Valparaiso University, presents a

A misleading picture

A few days before Christmas I saw an interesting full-page ad in each of four cities' newspapers. Filling the whole page was a drawing of a man working at a wooden carpenter's bench and a toddler playing on the floor beside him. The man wore a long, loose garment and was using a primitive hammer. Everything in the picture was clearly meant to show the setting in which the earthly Jesus lived.



The toddler was plump, blond, and light-skinned like the man. A circle of light was on top of the toddler's head. He was playing with some huge metal nails. Two boards, one shorter than the other, were prominent on the floor beside him. The light from an open doorway spotlighted him and made his body cast a distinct shadow. The shadow, however, wasn't shaped like his body. It was shaped like a cross.



Superimposed on the picture were these words—"Most of us spend our lives seeking our destiny. One man created His own. It began in a manger and led to a cross, and it included you." At the bottom was the message "If you would like to know Jesus as Savior and Lord, call ..." and the phone number and address of Hobby Lobby, the chain of craft-supply stores.

I appreciated the fact that a large business corporation—especially one whose business depends a lot on people buying Christmas wrappings and decorations—had bought expensive ad space in a lot of newspapers to promote the true meaning of Christmas, but the portrayal of Jesus bothered me.



The words seemed to imply that Jesus created his own destiny and that we can create ours in the same way—by using only our individual human resources to become whatever we happen to want to be. To me that doesn't seem an accurate portrayal, either of Jesus or of human beings. The picture bothered me even more, however. It gave Jesus physical characteristics that a native of Bethlehem two thousand years ago undoubtedly didn't have. It made him look like a baby of Northern European descent.

Far too often, Christians of that descent smugly act as if Jesus were a member of their group alone. Too often, that keeps them from seeing the worth of others.

thought-provoking view of a famous Jesus painting. In his book *Icons of American Protestantism: The Art of Warner Sallman* (David Morgan, editor; Yale University Press, 1996), Morgan and other scholars write about the 1940 Sallman “Head of Christ” and similar pictures that many churches display prominently.



Morgan’s book tells how millions of copies of Sallman’s “Head of Christ” have been displayed in church buildings but also in other influential places—in homes, on stationery, in church-school literature, on mementos of rites of passage such as baptism and first communion, and on items carried by servicemen in World War II. In Morgan’s view,

“Sallman’s imagery and its wide dissemination [are] a crucial part of a cultural system that has shaped religious piety and social identity among millions of American Protestants.”



Different reactions to the same picture

David Morgan reminds us, however, that although many Christians cherish the familiar Sallman “Head of Christ,” many don’t. Quite a few who wrote Morgan their reactions to the picture said they found it offensive. Some disliked it because of its ethnic and cultural inaccuracy. Others found it racist or effeminate.

Still others called it syrupy, anemic, weak, sentimental, or inappropriately sweet.



I share these reactions. During my youth I disliked the Sallman picture because it was part of church settings that turned me off—drab green-walled halls and classrooms, dilapidated furniture, stacks of yellowing literature, and teachers’ sticky-sweet words and dreary singing. Now, however, I’m bothered less by the picture’s role in such settings, and more by its inaccuracy that hinders justice.

What’s the problem?

For a lot of today’s Christians, especially older ones, Sallman’s painting is *the* picture of Jesus. Many treat it as if it were a photograph of Jesus.

What’s wrong with that? Several things.



- The Sallman portrait of Jesus is merely one person’s speculation about how Jesus looked. There’s

no reason to think it shows how he really looked, any more than any other artist’s conception does.

- Even if cameras had existed in Jesus’ time, a photo of him undoubtedly wouldn’t have looked like the Sallman picture. It shows a person with smooth blondish-brown hair, light skin, and Northern European facial features, but Jesus presumably would have had the darker coloring and facial features typical of what we now call the Middle East.



- Despite its probable inaccuracy, the Sallman painting and a few other similar ones are quite often displayed on church classroom walls along with factual information like maps of the Holy Land and Paul’s journeys, and lists of the books of the Bible. That use of the Sallman picture has given it an apparent stamp of approval that other artists’ guesses about what Jesus looked like don’t have.

A commercial venture

Warner Sallman was a commercial artist who in his “Head of Christ” used many techniques common to the commercial art of the 1940’s. David Morgan points out surprising but undeniable similarities between the pose, lighting effects, colors, and facial expression of the Sallman painting and those features of other commercial portraits of its time. The “Head of Christ” and other Sallman portrayals of Jesus have an amazing number of features in common, for example, with

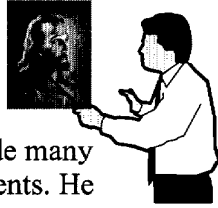


1940s high-school and college year-book pictures, advertisements for cosmetic products, and glamorous popular-movie-star pictures that were sent to the stars’ fans.

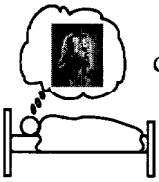
Sallman was a devoted Christian, and his publisher was a church-related firm, but the features that made his “Head of Christ” so popular were carefully chosen with popular tastes in mind. The impression of intimacy, spirituality, and radiance that the picture created was no accident. Its advertising and marketing were also very deliberate and were crucial to its popularity. Selling so-called Christian products by using the commercial world’s latest mass-advertising and marketing techniques isn’t just a development of recent years.

An unconvincing story

As a way of publicizing and thus selling products that featured his "Head of Christ," Sallman made many personal appearances at church events. He often told how the painting's view of Jesus came to him. Sallman's story varied a lot in his different tellings of it, however. It seemed designed to fit what each group of hearers wanted to hear. Also, his "Head of Christ" is amazingly similar to an earlier painting by another artist. Those factors keep Sallman's story from being convincing.



In his talks he usually described a dream-like experience, as if through it God had revealed what Jesus actually looked like, but this aspect of Sallman's story is also unconvincing. Visions and dreams of Jesus are relatively common, and what they reveal tends to be about the dreamers, not about Jesus.



I realized that when I had such a dream years ago. In it I was dancing with a man that somehow in the dream I knew was Jesus. He looked Anglo-American. He had straight, short, brown hair, styled in a typical contemporary American way. He wore a plaid sport shirt and light-blue slacks. The dream probably had an important message for me, but it clearly wasn't about the earthly Jesus's looks.



Making Bible characters look like us

Sallman's picture isn't the only misleading portrayal of an important biblical person. Many U.S. churches prominently display a set of recently marketed portraits that claim to portray



Jesus's traditional twelve male disciples, and they are similarly unrealistic. I recently heard a Christian say about them, "They all look like West Texas truck drivers."

Two ways to portray Jesus?

If we want to portray Jesus visually, it seems to me that there are only two ways that make sense. One is to make our best effort to show what the human, earthly Jesus probably looked like, based on the best information available to us about Jewish

natives of first-century Palestine. This wouldn't include light-colored skin or blond, smooth-textured hair or the facial features typical of northern European ancestry.



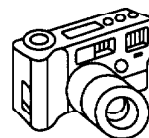
The other way is to acknowledge that we are portraying Jesus metaphorically rather than literally, in order to show our belief that the eternal Christ is the personal savior, guide, and friend of all kinds of people. For this purpose we could show Jesus with African-American, Hispanic, or Asian features, for example. Some churches now do this. We might even dare to show a female Jesus, as a much-criticized art work did several years ago. We could picture a first-century Jesus in robe and sandals sometimes, and a Jesus wearing jeans and walking in a shopping mall at other times.

Doing that isn't claiming that the earthly Jesus lived in this century or was female, Hispanic, African-American, European, or Asian. That would be ridiculous. Instead, portraying Jesus with different physical and cultural features is saying through visual symbolism that Jesus' human physical characteristics weren't what was important about him, any more than his typical-first-century-Palestine sandals and robes were. Features like those weren't what made him the Christ who is our savior and is with us always. They were merely part of being human at a particular time and place.



We forget that the two ways are different

What promotes injustice is our failure to make clear to ourselves and other people the difference between these two ways of portraying Jesus. We don't acknowledge that showing him with light skin and hair and European facial features is unrealistic. In addition, by using mainly one portrayal such as the Sallman portrait and putting it in so many church buildings, we create the false impression that it can be taken literally, as if it were a photograph of the earthly Jesus.



Maybe the only reasonable and honest route is either to use no visual images of Jesus or to use a

wide variety. What leads us astray is using only one kind, especially if that one is unrealistic, yet that's what we tend to do.

Viewers see what they need to find

"Viewers see in the image of Jesus," David Morgan notices, "what they need to find there." They personalize the image and address the picture as if it were Jesus himself. For the people who do this personalizing, however, it brings the picture to life in a very valuable way, Morgan finds. For them, "The measure of Christ's personal friendship is his constant presence, ... made more palpable in the im-

age itself." Even when pictures of Jesus are culturally or ethnically inaccurate, therefore, we can't dismiss them as totally worthless or harmful.

The part that images of Jesus play in promoting personal friendship with him raises the question of what Christians mean when they talk about such friendship. That's an important question, but it rarely is asked openly. Its answer evidently seems obvious to many Christians but baffles many others. I'll address that subject soon in *Connections*.



Barbara

The Bible doesn't explicitly describe Jesus's physical appearance. However, some Christians believe the description of the "suffering servant," which came from God through the prophet Isaiah, pertains to Jesus.

... so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance ... He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. ... As one from whom others hid their faces, he was despised, and we held him of no account.

—Isaiah 52:13-53:3

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