

## A Response to Touchdown Jesus: The Wages of Discipleship in America

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All citizens should be concerned about the way that excessive commodification has coarsened America's public discourse. And every Christian must be disturbed by the degree to which Christian identity has been drawn into the shallow bumper-sticker sloganeering and market branding that pervades American life. In too many cases, Christian faith has become just another personal preference and group identification—like wearing Nike apparel or the jersey of a favorite sports team. Like Malesic, I want the Christian churches to resist the shallowness and instrumentalism that pervades American culture. But I do not think the best way to do that is by retreating into a secret society “buffered” from the public life of a consumption-driven culture. The current situation in American life calls for an even more public church that creates space in the midst of a fallen world for more profound engagement with God and one another.

We live in an age when technological innovation and market mechanisms present themselves in messianic terms. They promise to enrich the quality of our lives and interactions. But like all false messiahs, they have not and cannot save us. Instead, they impoverish us morally and spiritually. Bowing before these idols of frantic change, we become two-dimensional billboards advertising shifting fads and momentary infatuations as we lurch from identity marker to identity marker in search of something solid upon which to fix our lives. Facebook, the latest and most technologically sophisticated way of presenting ourselves to the world, is simply the virtual equivalent of bumper-stickers and t-shirt slogans. It demands that we communicate who

we are and what matters to us in a word, a phrase, a link, a favorite restaurant, or a u-tube clip. Our discourse with one another is the frantic shorthand of people constantly on the move. Whether navigating the interstate or the information superhighway, whether walking the mall or surfing the internet, we flash lonely codes into the buzzing ether hoping to make tenuous contact with like-minded travelers as we race past one another.

In such a world, the ability to control and manipulate symbols confers both power and profit. Knowing how to draw and maintain the attention of a fickle and fluctuating crowd is the secret of electoral success and profit margin. Every advertising executive, cable broadcaster, and savvy politician knows that. In a fragmented culture, they preen and posture to draw a relevant market segment or significant electoral block. In a society that is still as religious as our own, it is no surprise that politicians manipulate Christian symbols to consolidate power and entrepreneurs use Christian identity to serve the profit motive.

As Malesic notes, this is not a novel predicament in the history of Christianity. Through the ages, Christian identity and witness have been compromised by association with a broken and sinful world, especially when the church has been prominent or powerful. While many bemoan the declining authority Christian faith over our society, it is also clear that desperate attempts to cling to crumbling grandeur have actually accelerated our skid into irrelevance. Christianity has been reduced to just another choice in a marketplace crammed with pleasingly packaged options. Christian leaders have become sales people offering a money back guarantee if you are not completely satisfied and Christians are transformed into savvy consumers, restlessly searching for the best spiritual deal in a buyer's market. Through such slippery compromises with the world, Christianity may continue to exist as a religion, but it does so by bowing before the spirits of the age. This is one of the dangers that Christianity has always faced.

It did not start with Constantine. It has been present since Satan tempted Jesus by offering him the world and the disciples argued over who was the greatest.

Like Malesic, I am convinced that we need to find ways to resist the spirits of our age. And I am persuaded that our resistance has something to do with strengthening the liturgical practices at the heart of Christian identity. I do not believe, however, that the best way to protect the practices of the church and the importance of Christian identity from corruption is through secrecy. Malesic appeals to Cyril of Jerusalem's effort to make the sacraments a secret reserved for true believers as a way to place, as he put it, "a buffer between the public life of the streets and the liturgical life of the church." By hiding the most essential aspects of Christian faith from public view, Cyril hoped that he could prevent people from manipulating them for self-serving economic and political reasons. Removing the markers of Christian identity from public display would remove the temptation to use them for public posturing and self-promotion. Drawing on Cyril, Malesic's strategy seems motivated by Jesus' warning not to "practice your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from you Father in heaven" (Matt. 6:1).

Nevertheless, I see two major danger's in Malesic's strategy, one primarily for Christians and the other for the world. At the conclusion of his essay, Malesic hopes that by stepping away from a public posture the church may learn humility. I am concerned that the sort of secrecy he encourages is equally prone to arrogance and triumphalism as the popular public faith he decries. During my senior year in college, I decided to go to seminary, but I was reluctant to tell anyone because I feared they would misunderstand. I was afraid they would confuse my motives with the self-righteous piety I loathed. In other words, I did not want to be confused with other Christians whom I did not think were worthy of the name. What was that but arrogance?

Ironically, my desire to keep quiet was motivated by the same sort of self-righteousness I associated with Christians who wore their faith on their sleeves. A church that creates a buffer between itself and the world (and other, less authentic, Christians) will not escape the danger of self-righteous arrogance. It will likely fall prey to it more wholeheartedly, without the corrective of critical publicity or the virtue of evangelical concern for the world. Such a secret liturgy might end up bearing witness to Christians' feelings of superiority rather than to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The second danger I fear is that the church's retreat from public life will abandon the world to the spirits of the age. The church's public witness, however imperfect, challenges the prevailing ethos even as it occasionally submits to it. Since its birth, the church has provided a new kind of social space and different type of public institution. In an age when family and clan dominated human identity, the church bore witness to the family of God. In an era when a person's responsibilities to the state dominated most institutions, the church insisted that its citizenship was in heaven. Certainly Christians regularly fell under the spell of these false gods and the church itself was often corrupted by their influence. But as long as the church had a foothold in the world, none of these false gods could hold absolute sway. They were always opposed, however imperfectly, by a public witness to the true sovereign, God almighty.

The strategy of secrecy, I fear, would simply abandon the field to the spirits of the age in the name of an elusive and impossible purity. When I first began working at Davidson College, the student body seemed to fall into two warring camps, the overtly Christian students and the militantly secular ones. The campus was in the grips of the culture wars largely because a plurality of the student body, who felt at home in neither camp, was silent and confused. They did not know what to say or how to identify themselves. They were Christian but did not identify

with the judgmentalism associated with it. They were not comfortable with anti-religious secularism, but they did not have a cogent argument against it. So they remained silent, leaving the public space to the rabid belligerents, whose self-righteous triumphalisms were simply ironic mirror images of one another.

Over the years, I am happy to say, those students found their voices. They found the courage to speak, even when they were not sure how best to say what was on their minds and in their hearts. They publicly proclaimed their faith in God and tried to embody it in their actions, even though neither was simple or straightforward. The battle lines were muddled by their public witness and the debate transformed into a conversation by their searching humility. The culture wars became an intense dialogue about human existence in an ambiguous world because these previously silent students, these secret Christians, found an inarticulate, tentative, and unsure public voice.

I fear that Malesic's hope for a purer church would simply abandon the public realm to the war of phony gods and the agony of false alternatives. We must not underestimate the significance of the church's imperfect, unsure, inarticulate, and ambiguous public witness. In a sermon about the call to ministry, Barbara Brown Taylor warns people considering this vocation that

if you decided to go ahead and do this, then your parishioners are going to watch *everything* you do—not only the way you run a meeting or hold a baby, but also how fast you drive your car and whether you bite your fingernails. They will do this because you are their parson—their representative person—who stands on the tippy edge between God and God's people, having promised to be true to them both. People will watch you to see what a life of faith really looks like.<sup>1</sup>

Such responsibility provokes in any sensible minister a painful degree of “imposter's syndrome.” No one can live up to such expectations. But then she reminds us that Peter, the rock upon which Jesus built the church, was far from perfect, courageously proclaiming Jesus the messiah one

moment and denying him the next. “If Peter is our model, then no one has to suffer from imposter’s syndrome. God knows who we are. God has known all along.” (55) At the end of the sermon, she remembers what a particularly wise and beloved mentor told her when she complained about the impossible weight of perfection. He said, “Oh lovely, that is not your job. If you decide to do this, then you’re not promising to be perfect. You’re just consenting to be visible—to let other people watch you while you try to figure out what real life is all about.” (56)

Not only pastors, but all Christians are called to this sort of publicity (and nothing more). The church is, to revise the old Protestant dictum, the *Parsonhood of all Believers*. We are not called to be perfect, but to be visible. We are called, in the midst of our confusion and imperfection to wrestle with God, the world, and one another as we try to figure out what it means to follow Jesus. In the end, a public church does not bear witness to its own goodness or the purity of its own identity, but to the God who is graciously sovereign over all things. As Christians gather to celebrate the sacraments, read scripture, and pray, we proclaim God’s power, goodness, and wisdom, not our own. We place our hope in God’s unwavering identity as gracious savior, not our own jumbled, confused, and shifting character.

Christians are God’s prodigal but repentant children who stumble each week back toward the house of God, before and on behalf of the whole world, surprised each time to find ourselves welcomed into the bosom of the Father. These public practices offer us and the whole desperate world hope that we are not lost or alone amidst the buzz and static of a commercial and technological age. I thank God that the church continues to offer an imperfect, inarticulate, and ambiguous public witness.

Questions to Consider:

1. What are good reasons to promote secrecy? What are bad reasons to do so? And how do we discern what may be motivating people when they promote it?
2. What do you think are the current “spirits of the age?” And how do they tempt us?
3. What does it mean to seek purity in a world full of ambiguity? What are the benefits and dangers of such a search?

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, “On this Rock,” *Awakened to a Calling: Reflections on the Vocation of Ministry*, ed. Ann M. Svennungsen and Melissa Wiginton (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005): 52.