

Touchdown Jesus: On the Wages of Discipleship in America

By Jonathan Malesic

This being football season, it seems appropriate to consider the case of Tim Tebow, the rookie backup quarterback for the Denver Broncos. Tebow was an astonishing player at the University of Florida. Big and fleet for a quarterback, he seemed in total command of everything happening on the field, passing and carrying the ball for big yardage gains virtually at will, accounting for nearly all of the Gators' offense in three years as the team's starting quarterback, winning the Heisman Trophy once and leading the Gators to the national championship in the 2008-2009 season.

Tebow's talent, however, was probably not the sole factor motivating the Broncos to invest a first-round draft pick and millions of dollars in him. In fact, many professional scouts doubted that Tebow's abilities as a passer were good enough for him to succeed in the pro game; perhaps he would end up as just another in a line of highly-touted Gator quarterbacks lacking what it takes to play the position well in the NFL.

That hardly matters. Tebow need not be a great player in order for the Broncos' investment in him to pay off. He will attract attention and advertisers to the team because of his highly visible Christian identity. He will be evangelical Christians' favorite player, and by association, perhaps the Broncos, who play 70 miles north of the evangelical Mecca of Colorado Springs, will become their favorite team.

The son of missionaries, Tebow expressed his religious identity most visibly by writing "John 3:16" and other chapter and verse designations on his eye black during his college games. (His choice of John 16:33 for last year's conference title game against Alabama turned out to

contain some irony. Christ may have “overcome the world,” but Tebow was unable to overcome the Crimson Tide’s defense in that game, the worst loss of his college career.) As the quarterback on a perennial national title contender, Tebow was the subject of many close-up shots during televised games, giving these messages a platform that few other living Christians, and perhaps only the Pope, could equal.

During the most recent Super Bowl telecast, Tebow appeared in an obliquely pro-life commercial sponsored by the Colorado Springs-based evangelical organization Focus on the Family. In the months after the ad aired, Tebow claimed that companies that had been interested in working out endorsement deals with him were now withdrawing their interest, presumably because they did not want to be associated with someone so outspoken about his strong, and purportedly unpopular, religious views.¹ Was this the cost of discipleship? Was Tebow paying a price for giving public witness to the gospel in an overly-secularized America?

There is no doubt that some Christian football fans think Tebow has an obligation to be as visible as a Christian as he possibly can, so as to evangelize the country, one 70,000-seat stadium at a time. Rick Long, a pastor and Bronco fan from a Denver suburb, told the *Denver Post* after Tebow was drafted, “You don’t want to just flaunt your faith but live it. I like the fact that he’s not afraid to do both. You have to be a living epistle. You’re the only Bible most people ever read. You’re the only Jesus most people ever see.”² Even leaving aside Long’s problematic Christology, his remark says a lot about Tebow and about Christianity’s position in American society right now. Tebow doesn’t *just* flaunt his faith, but he does flaunt it.

¹ Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “Tebow Says Focus Ad Cost Him Potential Sponsors,” *Christianity Today* Liveblog, April 21, 2010. Available online at http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctliveblog/archives/2010/04/tebow_says_focu.html. Accessed August 14, 2010.

² Electa Draper, “Colorado Evangelicals Singing Praises of McDaniels’ QB Pick Tebow,” *Denver Post* April 24, 2010. Available online at http://www.denverpost.com/news/ci_14948943. Accessed August 29, 2010.

And in fact, flaunting it has paid off handsomely for him, just as it has for countless American Christian politicians, businesspersons, and job-seekers who have advanced themselves in part because so many American voters, consumers, and employers accept Christian identity as a form of currency in our political and economic marketplaces. If Tebow had seriously thought that companies would not want him endorsing their products because of his visible Christian identity, then he had utterly misjudged the relation between Christian identity and contemporary American public life. Being publicly visible as a Christian not only does not harm one's ability to succeed, but in most cases it can be quite beneficial. Tebow ended up signing endorsement deals with Nike, the video-game maker EA Sports, and Jockey. (Yes, we may soon have the dubious privilege of seeing the only Jesus some of us will ever know cavorting in his underwear on television and billboard ads.) Moreover, Tebow said over the summer that he had begun *declining* multi-million dollar endorsement offers so that he could focus on football.³

So Tebow is emblematic of a powerful and, to my eyes, troubling, trend in American Christianity. Politicians pander to Christian voters without ceasing. Whether that is because Christian voters genuinely believe that an overt Christian will make a better, more moral, leader, or because they see Christian identity as a marker for political ideology, or because they just want to see someone on their religious "team" succeed, it's clear that having the right religious identity and making that identity well known can win candidates great benefits. While it's certainly not equally true across the country—an explicitly Christian politician will gain more traction in Birmingham than Berkeley—it is true enough in large enough pockets of American life that it is worthwhile for public figures to play up a Christian identity wherever possible.

³ Ron Higgins, "Tim Tebow Brings Magic to Memphis," *The Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, Tenn.), May 12, 2010. Available online at <http://www.commercialappeal.com/news/2010/may/12/tebow-brings-magic-to-memphis/>. Accessed September 15, 2010.

Even many less-prominent Americans similarly employ Christian identity as a personal or corporate brand identity. At least until the current recession, many businesses had been installing chapels at their offices and hiring chaplains, and evangelical Christians in high-profile positions in media, education, and business had formed powerful networks to promote both good business and the Good News.⁴

This fact of American society may be widespread, but that hardly means it is a good thing for American Christianity. It certainly has been good for the careers of many Christians. But what effect does it have on the faith itself? Has the constant cultivation and display of Christian identity in American public life actually done harm to the distinctiveness of that identity?

To answer these questions, let's return to Tebow's eye black. The gesture may seem harmless enough. I do not doubt Tebow's sincerity; he probably does think that he is helping to win souls for Christ. Maybe he is. But any message, any gesture, is shaped by its context, which includes the other messages being sent around it. The American flag, affixed to Peter Fonda's leather jacket in *Easy Rider*, does not mean the same thing as the one printed on a T-shirt and worn by someone at a Glenn Beck rally

When Tebow suited up last January for his final college game, the Sugar Bowl, the most photographed face on the field was framed by logos for his team, the NCAA, Allstate (the game's corporate sponsor), and Nike—all of them emblazoned on the upper part of his jersey. In a context like that, with other corporate entities using Tebow as the means to promote themselves and sell products, was "EPH 2:8-10" painted underneath his eyes any different from the trademarked Swoosh on his chest? Tebow showed that he was on the Florida team, the Nike team, and (mustn't we conclude?) the Jesus team, too.

⁴ D. Michael Lindsay, *Faith in the Halls of Power: How Evangelicals Joined the American Elite* (New York: Oxford, 2007).

Except, of course, that being Christian is not like being a Gator. Or a Gator fan. Or a devoted Nike wearer. It is instead about, well, being “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life” (Eph 2:10).

Tebow’s eyeblack and the office chapels and the careerist church-shopping all signal that the church in America cannot tell the difference between different kinds of identities. To be a Christian and to be a consumer or a party member have become the same species of thing, the outgrowth not of faith but of preference. And in spite of what I assume to be Tebow’s sincerity, many of those who loudly lay claim to a Christian identity certainly are insincere, putting on the trappings of faith precisely to get ahead. It is especially difficult today to take seriously the pieties of candidates for national political offices, given the extent to which their every word is poll-tested and focus-grouped, their public identities thoroughly commodified. In our highly competitive public arenas, in which even a modest advantage can yield tremendous returns, politicians have good reason to try to wring a few more votes out of Christian constituencies. Their brand of false posturing, however (cheap grace if there ever was such a thing), devalues the genuine and difficult witness other Christians might try to make. As Karl Barth wrote, “just as genuine coins are open to suspicion so long as false coins are in circulation, so the perception which proceeds outwards from God cannot have free course until the arrogance of religion be done away.”⁵

Who is to blame for this religious counterfeiting? Speaking theologically, one is tempted to say something about the universality of original sin and conclude that everyone—public figures at all levels, voters, church leaders, the media—is to blame for this state of affairs. As unsatisfactory as it can be to spread the blame so thinly and broadly, this is in fact a more honest

⁵ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed., trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 37.

response than simply blaming politicians, for example, who after all would not flaunt their Christian identity if there were not large numbers of voters who responded so favorably to it. Similarly, “the media” (granting, for now, the coherence of this category) only inflate silly issues into large-scale controversies because their audiences hunger for this kind of entertainment. American Christians at large are responsible for creating the entire matrix of Christian identity, public life, and a religious culture, heavily determined by evangelicalism, that prizes highly public witness, as seen in pastor Rick Long’s comments on Tebow.

This acknowledgement of collective culpability sits at the heart of Reinhold Niebuhr’s realist approach to ethics and politics. The tendency to sin is strong, and it grows exponentially, Niebuhr thought, as the number of people involved grows, so that we need to establish institutions of justice capable of corralling our self-interest and thus keeping us from destroying ourselves. The current situation in American Christianity came about through Christians’ self-interested use of their Christian identity to get ahead in public life, a use that has turned that identity into something more like a club membership. Ironically, Christians have thereby dulled the edges of any distinctive witness they might have hoped to make in the American public sphere.

So if American Christians want to reinvigorate their church’s challenge to culture, then change is necessary both at the level of the identity-producer and the identity-consumer: producers need to be less opportunistic about using Christian identity to get ahead, and consumers need to change their expectations about the visibility of Christian identity, being less willing to provide a payoff for those opportunists.

How can this change come about? How can Christians do away with this arrogance? I do not think that an institutional remedy is called for in this case. The therapy for this sickness

will require widespread and radical changes in American Christians' behavior and expectations, but each one will only be able to do it for himself or herself—this sickness after all results from individuals trying to extract personal benefit from a matrix they have contributed to creating. The problem is abetted through religious expression, but in a democracy, there should not be institutions arbitrating what can be expressed and what cannot. Any solution must be proposed from within the church but operate on the individual's desires and expectations. As with any Christian theological or moral proposal, the best response will come from within the tradition, attuned to both theoretical and pastoral concerns. We will need to draw from the tradition's best minds and hearts, from times when they were applied to serious crises of Christian identity.

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To develop a response, we might call to mind a political leader who came to power over a vast and powerful but deeply divided realm. This leader, who underwent a surprising religious conversion in adulthood, claiming to have overcome severe problems through God's direct intervention, gave considerable privilege to individual Christians and to Christian institutions during his years in power, handing duties that had been the province of government over to faith-based organizations. Many prominent Christian figures at the time rejoiced, hailing this leader for ending the long, dark age when Christian voices were absent from the halls of public power.

I am referring, of course, to the early fourth century. In gratitude to Christus Victor for aiding his triumph over a rival to the *imperium* at the Milvian Bridge, Constantine made Christianity legal, gave Christians a tax break and the use of public buildings, and permitted Christian bishops to settle disputes that had previously been adjudicated in civil courts. This

inaugurated a long marriage between Christianity and public life. Predictably, people flocked to the Christian churches in the Constantinian period, eager to enroll their names for baptism.

Some Christian bishops at the time saw the rapid growth of the Church as proof of Christ's victory over idolatry and sin (Athanasius of Alexandria). Others saw the emperor as a kind of second Christ, bringing light to far-flung lands (Eusebius of Antioch). Still others, including one bishop whose see benefited enormously from imperial patronage, saw it as a mixed blessing: while it was certainly better for people to be Christian than not be Christian, the favor granted to Christianity in public life could corrupt genuine faith by mixing it with base opportunism.

Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem from about 351 until the mid-380s, recognized the problem of faith's debasement, telling some who had enrolled their names for baptism, "Perhaps some man among you has come because he wants to win the approval of his girl-friend.... Perhaps a slave has wanted to please his master or someone has wanted to please a friend. I accept this as bait for my hook and let you in. You may have had the wrong reason for coming, but I have good hope that you will be saved."⁶

The key for Jerusalem's religious opportunists was merely to lay a legitimate claim to Christian identity by enrolling in the order of catechumens, and then take advantage of the worldly benefits that claim could provide. There was little public incentive actually to undergo baptism and receive the other sacraments—and thereby also be held to the church's stringent moral standards.

Cyril recognized that he could not put a stop to the public benefits the empire afforded to Christians—and perhaps he did not want to, in light of the patronage he received. But he could

⁶ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Proslogion* 5. In Edward Yarnold, S.J., ed., *Cyril of Jerusalem* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 81.

do his best to reform the motivations of those seeking to become members of his church, so that they would see the sacraments as the principal benefits of becoming Christians. To help shape the candidates' desires for baptism, then, Cyril concealed the sacraments, including any explicit teaching about the sacraments, from the candidates until the night of their baptisms. Once they were baptized in what he describes as an awe-inspiring service, Cyril enjoined the neophytes to maintain this discipline of the secret, refraining from telling any outsiders anything about the sacrament. Being a member of the church requires that one not throw what is holy to the dogs.

By means of this, explicit discussion of the sacraments—the distinctive markers of Christian identity—was confined not only to the church building itself, but to the innermost court of the church (the area in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher known as the Anastasis, the site of the resurrection), where no unbaptized were permitted. Cyril thus placed a buffer between the public life of the streets and the liturgical life of the church. And because receiving the sacraments was for him (as it remains today in the more liturgical traditions) the preeminent sign that someone was a Christian, he in effect placed a buffer between Christian identity and public life.

The analogy between Cyril's time and ours is not perfect—above all, Christianity is not the *official* medium of American public life—but the response of this prominent bishop provides all Christians a template for preserving their integrity when opportunism threatens it. For Cyril, what makes a Christian is not merely a matter of enrolling one's name on a list, but of having a faith formed by the grace of God in the sacraments. Because of their power and mystery, the things that really do make a person Christian should be hidden from the unbaptized and displayed only in exclusively Christian settings, like the liturgy. This can help combat

opportunism, because if something cannot be seen by the public at large, then it cannot be exploited for worldly gain.

As Christian identity is for Americans today marked much more by words than by liturgical actions, taking a lesson from Cyril would mean keeping silent about Christian commitment in public arenas, where the temptation to sell off Christian identity is high. It would mean refusing to capitalize on membership in bible study groups that happen to include powerful individuals. It would mean ceasing to try to find the bible study that features the most powerful membership. It would mean (for one prominent American, anyway) refusing to answer those who claim that one is a Muslim bent on destroying American Christian culture, even if there were political costs to remaining silent on the issue. Considered theologically, the integrity of Christian faith is worth more than these worldly goods.

Cyril presided in Jerusalem at a period of remarkable expansion for the church, both in terms of its membership and its public power. As the historian of religions Paul Johnson has argued, calls for religious secrecy often occur at such times of transition, when a religion is becoming either more or less aligned with public life.⁷ But within Christianity, there were attempts to conceal Christian identity for the sake of the integrity of Christian practice even when the church was fully and stably integrated with public life, as in Medieval Italy. A fourteenth century processional banner painted by Spinello Aretino depicts lay members of a religious society kneeling before their patroness, Mary Magdalene.⁸ Her adorers wear white robes, their faces fully veiled, as they would have been during the procession. (It is unfortunate

⁷ Paul Christopher Johnson, *Secrets, Gossip, and Gods: The Transformation of Brazilian Candomblé* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁸ Spinello Aretino (Spinello di Luca Spinelli), "Processional Banner" (c. 1395-1400). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, N.Y. Accession number 13.175. Image available online at http://www.metmuseum.org/works_of_art/collection_database/european_paintings/processional_banner_spinello_aretino_spinello_di_luca_spinelli/objectview.aspx?collID=11&OID=110002197.

that the figures depicted on the banner now look to us like Klansmen; this only testifies to the perversity of the Ku Klux Klan's appropriation of Christian—even, ironically, Catholic—belief and practice.) That the Medieval religious society had members was no secret, but its members' identities were, so that they would not be repaid through public praise for their devotion.

In modernity as well, at critical moments in the church's history, some of its sharpest thinkers made calls to conceal what they saw as the distinctive grounds for Christian identity, in order to prevent that identity from being debased through its accommodation to worldly paradigms. In mid-nineteenth century Copenhagen, Søren Kierkegaard sought to sever the easy association between capitalism and Christian neighbor love by telling the bourgeois denizens of Christendom that genuine faith was an unspeakable secret and that consequently, the distinctive works of love that Christians perform must be done secretly. If they were not, Kierkegaard argued, these works would become no more than worldly investments that one hoped would be repaid. And in 1930s and '40s Germany, when the Lutheran church had been made to accommodate Nazi ideology, Dietrich Bonhoeffer in many of his writings called for pastors to preach a "secret discipline" that involved maintaining anonymity as Christians in public while practicing the faith through "prayer and righteous action" out of the sight of a world that had lost its ability to recognize genuine Christianity.⁹

To be sure, a church of secret Christians—concealing their religious identity to avoid not persecution but rather the corruption of their faith through their own tendency to capitalize on their Christian identity—would operate and understand itself quite differently from the church as we now understand it. It is hard to say in advance how such a church would gain new members or convene large meetings. Perhaps these activities would have to be curtailed for a time. In that

⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, enlarged ed., ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 300.

case, American Christians might need to rediscover the virtue of patience, acknowledging, as Bonhoeffer did, that if Christ is the Lord of all time, then there is time enough to accomplish his purposes.

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A good friend of mine who grew up in a Dutch Calvinist community in Washington state tells me that as a boy he hoped it was true that all the Seattle Seahawks' players had been saved, because he did not want to be rooting for his religious opponents on Sunday afternoons. He can surely be forgiven for having seen Christian identity and religious identity in analogous terms at a young age. But too many Christian adults who should know better still see the activity on the field of our public religious arena in terms like these. To them, Christians (of the right sort) are pitted against everyone else in a contest for influence over America's destiny. This view is problematic for many reasons. Not least of them is its confusion of God's purposes with one's own. It also presumes a bit too much righteousness, glossing over sin's hold on human actions.

As in pro football, there is big money in being a pro Christian in America today. There is big power in it, too, as we learn every election cycle. Public life is highly competitive, but being a Christian is not supposed to be so. Maybe if Christians stopped singing the triumphalist, rah-rah fight songs, stopped shopping themselves around for the best free agent deals, and removed their *ichthus* logos, so that fans could no longer tell at a glance who was on which team, then maybe the silly game would stop altogether. Their faith, released from the burden of public negotiability, might again be able to speak authentic words of witness to the world.