



Cedarville University
DigitalCommons@Cedarville


Alumni Book Gallery

2003

The Trouble with Jesus

Joseph M. Stowell

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/alum_books

 Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Stowell, Joseph M., "The Trouble with Jesus" (2003). *Alumni Book Gallery*. 180.
https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/alum_books/180

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Cedarville, a service of the Centennial Library. It has been accepted for inclusion in Alumni Book Gallery by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Cedarville. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@cedarville.edu.



The Trouble with Jesus

Disciplines

Biblical Studies | Christianity | Practical Theology | Religion

Publisher

Moody Press

Publisher's Note

Excerpt from *The Trouble with Jesus* by Joseph M. Stowell. Moody Publishers: Chicago, IL. © Joseph M. Stowell, 2003. Used with permission from Moody Publishers.

ISBN

0802410898

BREAKFAST WITHOUT JESUS

The Traditions That Divide Us

The Chicago Leadership Prayer Breakfast is an annual event held the first Friday after the week of Thanksgiving. If you work in Chicago, attending the breakfast is the religious thing to do, second only to showing up at church on Christmas and Easter. I have gone to the event for the last fifteen years.

I can remember years ago when the name of Jesus was freely used in prayers and sermons alike at the breakfast. And though that has been slowly changing, this year's event was marked by what seemed to be an intentional effort to eliminate references to Jesus from the platform. If it weren't for the marvelous music of the Wheaton College choirs, who unashamedly sang about Him, the whole morning would have drifted by without the mere mention of

His name. I doubt if the choirmaster had been required to submit the texts of the repertoire to screen them for references to Jesus, given what took place in the rest of the program.

The MC opened the early morning get-together by reading an excerpt from Diane Eck's best-seller, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*.¹ He then underscored that diversity of religion in America now demands a new paradigm regarding the expression of our faith. He called for a fresh wind of cooperation and tolerance. His words set the stage for all that was to follow.

A representative of Islam chanted his prayer in the name of Allah. A woman rabbi, a Catholic priest, and a minister from a characteristically liberal Protestant denomination each led in prayer in a coordinated sequence of prayers and then finished by praying in unison.

I kept waiting to hear it, but Jesus' name was not mentioned once.

No one said that He wasn't welcome, but the message was clear. All our "gods" are to be equal. And when that is the agenda, the authentic Jesus is trouble. It's difficult to include One who has claimed to be the *only* way to God when a diversity of paths to God is being celebrated.

What was unspoken in the symbolism of the prayers was made unmistakably plain in the mes-

sage that followed. The rector of Trinity Church, Wall Street, New York City, was introduced as being deeply involved in the problems and ministries surrounding the disaster of September 11, 2001. I looked forward to what he had to say. He proved to be an excellent communicator, as he charmed us with his wit and well-timed humor. We were deeply moved as he related stories of tragedy and triumph at Ground Zero. However, as his message progressed, he put into words my worst fears about post-9/11 America.

In essence, he celebrated the fact that after September 11 a whole new sense of the importance of God had returned to America. As he put it, “Theology is the name of the game after 9/11!” But, he noted, given the broad diversity of religions in America, we now need to give up the “traditions” that divide those of us who believe in “God.” He praised the diversity the prayer segment had expressed.

It was then that I began to realize why Jesus was unwelcome. He was telling us in no uncertain terms that an “Only-Way-Jesus” didn’t fit in the new religious order.

I could have shrugged it off as an isolated voice out of touch with the rest of America if it weren’t for the fact that this sentiment is being propagated broadly. *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman writes, “It is urgent that the different religions ‘reinterpret’ their traditions to embrace modernity

and pluralism and to create space for secularism and alternative faiths.”² In an article in the *Chicago Tribune*, Bishop C. Joseph Sprague of the United Methodist Church’s Northern Illinois Conference echoed that sentiment when he said, “I am always fearful when we in the Christian community move beyond the rightful claim that Jesus is decisive for us, to the presupposition that non-Christians . . . are outside God’s plan of salvation. That smacks of a kind of non-Jesus-like arrogance.”³

Lamenting that many are so exclusive in their own traditions that they don’t allow God to speak through other traditions, our speaker of the morning went on to say, “9/11 will help you and me let go of some things that keep us from realizing that God works through others.” He then quoted our Chicago poet, Carl Sandburg, who reportedly said, “The worst word in the English language is ‘exclusive.’” The speaker’s intention was clear: No one should claim an exclusive corner on the pathway to God.

To push Jesus out of the picture because He is exclusive is not the whole story. As Anne Graham Lotz said on Moody Broadcasting’s national program *Open Line*, “Jesus is the only way, but He is not exclusive. He welcomes all to His offer of eternal life. No one is excluded at the cross.”

That morning I wish I could have proclaimed the good news that Jesus welcomes all who will come.

ASKING FOR MORE THAN I CAN GIVE . . .

Having asked us to give up the traditions that divide us, it was clear that the “tradition” he was asking me to give up was *Jesus*.

In my mind it is a gross underselling of Jesus to call Him a tradition. But that is exactly what He was being called. If I would just be willing not to speak His name in public prayer or articulate His exclusive claims to deity, truth, or redemption, we could get on with the business of celebrating our plurality of gods. Or, if I would be willing to strip Him of His rightful claim to supremacy and re-engineer Him so that He could “get along” with other gods, everything would be fine.

Let’s face it. While not exclusive in the wideness of His mercy, Jesus is exclusive in His claim that He is the only solution for our sin problem and the only way to God. And that indeed He *is* God. Jesus is the central issue that separates me from Hindus, Muslims, Jews, New Age adherents, and the advocates of any other form of religion. His claims are unique. Without shame He said, “I am the way, the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John 14:6 KJV). The apostles didn’t miss the point. They proclaimed without reservation, “There is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

My friend Dr. Kent Hughes, pastor of College

Church in Wheaton, Illinois, says that in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus agonized with His Father to be relieved of the torturous ordeal of the Cross. Jesus' plea was for His Father to design another way to get the work of redemption done. After all, given His divine, unlimited creativity, and infinite wisdom, God would have been the best one to craft an alternative plan. But there could be no other plan because the sin problem needed a Savior. And God, in the person of Jesus dying on the cross for our sins and defeating death through His resurrection was the only solution.

There is no other way!

JESUS ABOVE ALL OTHER GODS . . .

Merging Jesus into a meaningless equality with other "gods" flies in the face of His rightful claim of preeminence. Try to downsize Him after reading this list of unparalleled credentials:

Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before God made anything at all and is supreme over all creation. Christ is the one through whom God created everything in heaven and earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can't see—kings, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities. Everything has been created through him and for him. He existed before everything else began, and he holds all creation together.

Christ is the head of the church, which is his body. He is the first of all who will rise from the dead, so he is first in everything. For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ, and by him God reconciled everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of his blood on the cross. (Colossians 1:15-20 NLT)

Make no mistake. Jesus is unequalled. He doesn't compete.

Every hope, every confidence, every ache in our soul demands Jesus as He claims to be.

As the breakfast talk continued, my mind raced down the road of what Christianity without Jesus would be like . . . of what my life would be like if I had to give Him up.

- *Without Him the story line of the Bible disappears. The whole of Scripture is about rectifying the fatal consequences of the Fall. The promise of the remedy; the nation that carried the seed; the birth, death, and resurrection of The Solution; and the assurance of ultimate eternal victory is what the Bible is about.*
- *Without Him my guilt remains and I have no hope of forgiveness. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 JOHN 1:9).*
- *Without Him I can't get to God. "There is one . . .*

THE TROUBLE WITH JESUS

mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 TIMOTHY 2:5 KJV). In fact, my relationship to God rises or falls on my attitude toward Jesus. As Jesus Himself said, “He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him” (JOHN 5:23 NIV). It’s simple. You can’t have one without the other.

- *Without Him heaven is gone and hell remains my just reward. “There is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (ACTS 4:12 NIV).*
- *Without Him I don’t have a prayer. “You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it” (JOHN 14:14 NIV).*
- *Without Him I have no joy. “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete” (JOHN 15:11 NIV).*
- *Without Him I’ve lost my friend. “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends” (JOHN 15:15 NIV).*
- *Without Him I’ve lost my guide. “Follow Me!” (MATTHEW 9:9).*
- *Without Him I’ve lost my eternity. “But whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (JOHN 4:14 NIV).*

“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him” (JOHN 3:36 NIV).

So much is at stake!

I was being asked to give up the most valuable treasure of my life. My heart was saddened and unsettled. As a follower of Jesus, I was being told that there was no room for “my kind” and certainly no room for my Jesus in this new world order.

Those who know me best will tell you that I am anything but an alarmist. In fact, I am wired toward optimism to a fault. Yet on that December morning I couldn’t shake the heaviness in my soul.

KEEP HIM TO YOURSELF . . .

To be fair, I am confident that advocates of this new religious diversity would readily say that Jesus is OK as long as you keep Him to yourself. After all, in our enlightened culture we are all entitled to our own opinions as long as they don’t interfere with or offend the sensitivities of others.

In other words, you can keep Him, but keep Him to yourself.

Which begs the question. Can Jesus be a private thing, or did He come to announce to the whole world that He alone brings forgiveness, healing, and hope to an otherwise confused and eternally lost humanity?

Is it possible to embrace His claims privately and at the same time deny the broad public implications of His mission? Can He be valued in our songs of worship and the rhetoric of our sermons and then be set aside for a greater cultural cause?

No one in the early church had the impression that Jesus was a private affair. They were, in the words of historian Will Durant, like “offices of propaganda” spreading the word to every willing ear.

STICKING UP FOR JESUS . . .

I could have written off the whole speech as just another preacher gone soft. In fact, I kind of had that “Well, I’m not surprised to hear this from a liberal New York parish priest” feeling when my worst fears were realized.

As the rector concluded his remarks, I remember thinking, *I wonder how this crowd is going to respond?*

No sooner had the thought crossed my mind than the audience stood in enthusiastic, extended, thunderous applause.

I felt awkward. Awkward and alone.

For the first time in my life, I was being asked to publicly deny Jesus. By joining in the standing ovation I would affirm the speaker’s premise that it was best for me to give up the “tradition” that divided us. It was clear. The only way I could stand would be to turn my back on Jesus.

People at tables all around me were on their feet in boisterous support.

Yet I knew I shouldn't stand. I felt unsettlingly conspicuous.

But as embarrassing as it was, I didn't stand. I couldn't. And I was sick at heart. Though saddened by what was being done to Jesus in the name of religion, I remembered that it wasn't the first time He had been rejected. And although those around me weren't crying, "Crucify him!" they were rooting for and celebrating a religious world without Jesus. The same Jesus who was sent by the religious crowd of His day to die outside the gates was being similarly dismissed in Chicago.

I kept thinking, *Maybe I'm overreacting. Making too much of a fleeting moment in time. Being too sensitive . . . too reactionary.* I would like that to have been the case. But my heart and head said no. In fact, my colleagues from Moody who were with me, but who couldn't see me because they were sitting in front of me, didn't stand either. The issue before us was that clear. Any thinking Christian would have felt the heat.

At that breakfast I made a decision. I committed myself to *stick up for Jesus* whenever and wherever . . . regardless. Though I knew that this decision might come at a cost, I was ready to take it on. Experiencing Him has been the pleasure of my life; now, sticking up for Jesus would be the privilege of my life. After all, He stuck up for me two thousand

years ago on the cross at ultimate cost to Himself. Sticking up for Him was the least I could do.

Tell me that I am not alone.

What would you have done?

I can't imagine anyone of us who know and love Him who wouldn't say, "I'll gladly be His advocate, anytime, anywhere!"

THE UNEXPECTED CHANGE . . .

Although the claim was widely embraced that after 9/11 America would never be the same again, I had not expected this. While the speaker's sentiments about Jesus had been lurking under the cover of secularism for some time, they were now out of the closet and ruling the day. As I left the breakfast, I recalled the *Larry King Live* show a few days earlier when John MacArthur was drilled in the aftermath of September 11 about the singular claims of Christ—and how MacArthur's voice was marginalized by the other panelists. And I understood what Shawn Hannity of Fox News meant when he said to Anne Graham Lotz a couple of weeks later, "Are you saying that Jesus is the only way? You know how mad that makes people today, don't you!"

Gene Edward Veith observed in *World Magazine* that the day has now come when "faithful Christians better be ready to become unpopular. . . . To say that all religions are true means that no religion

is true. The only way to bring them under one umbrella is to deny their distinctive teaching.” In this environment, Veith said, “Christians will find themselves demonized as ‘intolerant,’ perhaps our culture’s worst term of abuse.” He concluded by asking this question: “Christians have endured martyrdom, but can they endure unpopularity?”⁴

BRIGHT LIGHTS . . .

A pastor in Connecticut recently told me that after closing his prayer, “In Jesus’ name,” at a town meeting, he was visited by several clergy requesting that he not use the name of Jesus publicly in the future. When he explained that he couldn’t do that, they proceeded to take out ad space in the newspaper calling him “divisive,” isolating him from the religious community of his town.

John Dooley pastors the Apostles Lutheran Church in Chesapeake, Virginia. He has been a leading advocate of bringing people in his area together for prayer and mutual support in advancing the cause of Christ. So it was no surprise that he was asked to participate in a community wide service that included a broad diversity of faiths in the area.

He was considering accepting the invitation until he saw the literature for the event, which announced, “We are all Children of God and have a place in God’s Kingdom here and in heaven.” Knowing that

Muslims, Hindus, and other non-Jesus faiths were being included, he could not in good conscience affirm that all those who were included in the event had “a place in God’s Kingdom and in heaven.” He graciously declined. It was not an easy decision. Pastor Dooley is not a belligerent person. In fact, he said, “had there been rioting against Muslims or anyone else I would have gladly stood with a Muslim cleric . . . even called him a friend, and definitely would have called for an end of violence.”

The backlash against Pastor Dooley and other nonparticipants was swift and vicious. In an article in the “Issues of Faith” section of the local newspaper, *The Virginian-Pilot*, Betsy Wright wrote:

Once again members of my faith have gotten their boxers in a bunch. . . . A handful of local pastors . . . are worried that interfaith prayer services diminish the Gospel message. . . . OK, boys, all together now, let’s take a deep breath and r-e-l-a-x. . . . Interfaith prayer services do not diminish the Gospel message. On the contrary, I believe these events reinforce the heart of Jesus’ teachings and allow Christians to share the gospel in a radical way.

I know personally that my faith has been deepened and enriched by interfaith experiences, as has my love for God and all humanity.

So how can any Christian denounce anything that helps a human keep the two commandments

that Jesus said were the most important of all: loving God and loving your neighbor?

... The answer is fear.

That's OK. Keep your fears, ye folk of little faith. But do us brave believers who know we can be in the world but not of the world a favor: stay home, lock yourselves away in your tiny, I've-got-God-in-a-box world.

Then lock your lips and throw the key away.⁵

The inference in this vitriolic attack was that Ms. Wright was on the side of Jesus and the Bible and that those who conscientiously declined to attend were the true deniers of the faith.

Nothing could be further from the truth!

Services that affirm the legitimacy of false religions by demonstrating that we are all one and praying to the same "god" do injury to the gospel message. Pastor Dooley was right not to cast his lot with an event that would keep Jesus out of bounds.

It would be hard to imagine the apostles getting together with synagogue leaders and priests of pagan temples to join in common prayer. The only inter-faith service I know of in Scripture is the service where Elijah prayed to God in front of the prophets of Baal. The prayers of Baal's followers were of no avail, but in response to Elijah's prayers, God sent fire from heaven to ignite a water-drenched sacrifice, demonstrating that He alone is God (1 Kings 18:17-46).

We must never forget the First Commandment, which says, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3-4).

JESUS IS THE ISSUE . . .

In a letter to Christian leaders, Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade, warned, "The reality of our position has never been more plain. Generally, secular news media allow the promotion of any religion. . . . It is fashionable to speak of Buddha, Mohammed, Confucius, but the name of Jesus is too often *persona non grata*. One can say nearly anything demeaning of a Christian. Recent comparisons of Biblical Christianity to the Taliban in Afganistan are merely the beginning . . . which, left unchallenged, will leave the next generation of Christians to be the most assailed in our history."

If Bill Bright is right, and I think he is, the defining issue for followers of Christ of our generation is, *What we are going to do with Jesus in a world that either doesn't want Him as He claims to be or wants to put its spin on Him to yield a harmless, sedate Jesus who threatens no one?*

Living for Jesus has never been more challenging!