

Saying goodbye to the Jesus I once knew



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

As a freethinker, I don't often attend religious services, though now and then I go, physically or virtually. One Sunday morning I observed two services, in split screen, online. One, an older assembly, the other, mostly a younger crowd.

These congregations presented two divergent images of Jesus: He has essentially transformed into the "People of God," alive in the activity of the church community, or, he is primarily present for individual salvation requiring constant prayer, praise and pleas for forgiveness.

One service seemed centered on intense emotion generated by a live band performing praise music followed by an energetic and entertaining preaching performance.

The other service presented less of an emotional experience, more interactive, reflective.

One congregation loudly proclaimed a personalistic faith, the "Me and God" variety. This God appears to be a Divine Ego in serious need of praise, and continual "falling at his feet," as one of their songs expressed.

Both services included, explicitly or implicitly, the emptiness of the human heart. We are in need of salvation, either by the act of "inviting him into your

heart," or "partaking of his body and blood." Either way, something is missing in each human being. And the only way to find that missing piece is to say a particular prayer, participate in regular ritual, or come to a specific church ("where he is present").

These varied traditions believe in a kind of "spiritual spin cycle."

Sin-Forgiveness-Sin-Forgiveness...a never-ending circle of guilt and relief, with various levels of emotion. For some, a contrite prayer, spoken once a week, will do.

Others, apparently causing great pain to God, must fall to their knees daily seeking forgiveness.

"He loves you unconditionally" comes with a footnote: "But don't hurt or disappoint him."

One preacher yelled at the crowd: "we are in a battle; this is spiritual warfare!" He literally spoke of "brimstone and fire," the "second death." Emotional faith stirred by emotional fear.

The other pastor offered a quieter hope of healing. It was communion day, so "all are invited to the table." Those of us who don't feel drawn to accept that invitation, however gracious and heartfelt, don't feel the call to be "saved or burned" either.

What happened to the Jesus I once knew? He grew as I grew. One tradition would respond with the verse that Jesus is "the same yesterday, today and forever." Maybe, but in my view, he changed, matured.

Thankfully, so did I. As he became more human, I became more human. No

As (Jesus) became more human, I became more human. No longer an object of faith, an exalted human being demanding worship and belief, he came down from the clouds.

longer an object of faith, an exalted human being demanding worship and belief, he came down from the clouds; I grew to understand the value of a wise teacher, and what it means to be a wise student pursuing wisdom, and taking responsibility, rather than heed a divine authority. I can relate to another human who shared my humanity. I can't relate to a transcendent god.

Then, he left. And so did I. No longer found in a church, or a religion, this Jesus walked on the edges, crossed borders, ignored barriers of belief. He walked away from the church (he was never a member anyway), and so did I. At that stage, even after years of ministry, I sensed I was following him out the door, beyond the artificial walls constructed with creeds, theologies and scriptures.

Tradition — handed down authority — held no more power over him, or me. We left, together.

Where did he go, this Man of Nazareth I once worshipped, walking beside, finally walking away from? Truthfully,

he means more to me now than ever before. How can a secular person say that? Well, it means there are no demands or commands requiring belief in the historical person I now respect among all teachers, past and present, who urge us to be better human beings, to use our minds, to treat others with kindness. Now, when someone, like a Sunday morning preacher, yells at me that I should believe or else, that his Loving God built a place of torture for me and all other "unbelievers," I can shake my head with an inner assurance: that's not the Jesus I know.

Maybe once, but no more. Thank Goodness he left, he's gone, and he's so much better than that.

The popular "secular preacher" of the 19th century, Robert Green Ingersoll, passed along his humanist creed that still makes sense to me:

- Happiness is the only good.
- The time to be happy is now.
- The place to be happy is here.
- The way to be happy is to make others so.

It takes no threats of punishment or hands raised in praise to practice that kind of active happiness. Somehow I think the Nazarene would be good with that.

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His books and blogs are presented on "Friendly Freethinker" (www.chighland.com).