

FLATTERING  
MISCONCEPTIONS

I said earlier that many people hold in their minds their own version of Christ. It is as if he has become an abstract work of art, and we as the critics attempt to derive our own private meaning from the vague and ambiguous contours of his life.

Some people interpret Christ's life in a highly critical way—Melbourne academic Peter Singer, for instance, accuses Jesus of condoning cruelty to animals based on Luke 8:32-33. But most of us hold quite positive, even flattering, interpretations of Jesus. I was recently involved in a discussion about Christ's life on the ABC radio station Triple J, and I was amazed just how many of those who called in to make a comment held Jesus in great esteem. They lavished compliments on him like, the 'greatest teacher ever', the 'model of love', the 'great rebel against organized religion', an 'inspiring leader', a 'defender of the powerless', and so on. I sat there in the studio thinking, "Who would ever have thought that Jesus was such a celebrity here in a seemingly unreligious country like ours?"

These compliments reminded me of the popular views of Jesus in his own day. When Jesus asked his followers, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" they replied, "John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and others that an ancient prophet has risen up."

Each of these opinions was quite flattering, since John the Baptist, Elijah, and the rest, were great heroes of Israel's past. Associating Jesus with such great names was probably, in the minds of the crowds, something of a compliment.

But flattering misconceptions can be every bit as much a hindrance to understanding Christianity as some of the more insulting ones. They allow us to keep our distance from Christianity without actually offending the memory of Christ himself. They are a kind of religious equivalent to the romantic, "I just want to be friends!". If you've ever had this said to you, you'll know very well that it is usually just a way for someone to avoid getting close to you without causing too much offence.

There are many examples of this I-just-want-to-be-friends attitude toward Christ. In Islam, Jesus is seen as a 'prophet'. On the face of it, this is quite a positive picture. But in reality it means that Jesus is relegated by Muslims to a long list of prophets who are all made redundant by the arrival of their own prophet, Mohamed, 500 years after Christ. Again, in New-Age philosophy, Jesus is thought of as a truly 'enlightened' man, but in doing so, new-agers are able to place Christ on the shelf next to a thousand other 'enlightened ones' in the huge new-age supermarket of ideas.

Some of our own, less religious, compliments have the same effect. By calling Jesus a 'great teacher' we often relegate his significance to the realm of ethics, as if he came just to give us a list of dos and don'ts for happy living. In calling Jesus a 'great rebel against organized religion', we all too easily find our excuse for never going to church to hear any more about him. Very few people ever reject Jesus outright, but we're pretty good at saying we 'just want to be friends', and no more.

The other thing about these complimentary views of Jesus is that they can make us think that our response to him is an adequate one. But if Jesus really is the Christ—the one who speaks and acts for the Creator himself—calling him a ‘great teacher’, an ‘inspiring leader’ or a ‘model of love’ is hardly the appropriate response. It would be like responding to a life-saver who had just rescued me from certain drowning with the words, “You’re a jolly good swimmer, aren’t you!” On the face of it, this is a compliment, but it is hardly adequate.

A friend recently told me about a couple she knows who own an exclusive jewellery store in Sydney. One day, while the wife was attending the shop, a mild-mannered American gentleman walked into the shop looking to buy a pink Argyle diamond, worth \$20,000 or more, for his wife. Luckily they happened to have just the item he was after. As the credit card transaction was being made, the shop’s computer froze. The man lent over the counter, asked her a few questions about the operating system, and made some suggestions to get the system up and running again. Sure enough, the computer began to work again. The woman responded, “You know a bit about computers do you?”, to which he nodded and said, “Yes, a little”. He walked out of the shop with his diamond. Later when the woman’s husband arrived at the shop, he asked how the sales had been for the day. When she explained that she had sold a pink Argyle diamond to an American, he was intrigued to find out who the man was. Looking through the transaction records he found the receipt and was surprised to discover that they had sold the diamond to a Mr Bill Gates, CEO of Microsoft. The woman felt a little silly when she remembered what she had said to him: “You know a bit about computers do you?”. In reality, this is the man who practically

sets the agenda for the computer industry worldwide.

Some of us do a similar thing with Christ. We ‘compliment’ him with the opinion that he ‘knows a bit about life’. In reality, though, if Luke is to be believed, Jesus is the one God sent into the world to set the agenda for human life. He is the Christ.

When Jesus asked, “Who do you say I am?”, you can be sure he wasn’t fishing for compliments. He was asking those around him to search their hearts and intellects, evaluate all that they had seen, and arrive at the appropriate conclusion. To recall the Joe Louis incident, the nine chapters of Luke we’ve read so far function as a kind of business card for Jesus. Luke hands it to us, his readers, and awaits our response.