

12. JESUS NEVER PAID HOMAGE TO INDIVIDUALS

Anyone who delves into the annals of a church, an order, or a parachurch organization will find that there are founders, teachers, authors, or “heroes of the faith” whose messages and examples are foundational to the institution. One will also discover that to a large degree the purpose and the message of the institution is intimately connected to the lives of these individuals. Their writings and their life histories often form the distinctiveness of the organization.

Behind many Protestant churches are men such as Martin Luther, John Wesley, John Knox, John Calvin, and Huldrych Zwingli. Orders boast such men as Francis of Assisi, Benedict, and Bernard of Clairvaux. The Mormons have Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. The Orthodox are particularly proud of what they consider to be an unbroken chain of 2000 years of apostles. Each parachurch organization looks up to a founder. The missionary societies look to such men as Francis Xavier, Ignatius Loyola, William Carey, and a host of other “saints” and martyrs.

Much of Christianity gives a special place of honor to bishops and theologians of the second through the fifth centuries who are almost universally referred to as the Church Fathers. The Catholics have their popes, famous theologians such as Augustine, heroines like Joan of Arc, and in particular the one human who has been more praised and honored than any other: the Virgin Mary. She has been lifted up to heights that can only be compared to those of a goddess. It is officially claimed by the church that she was without sin and that she ascended into heaven. Her worshipers number into the tens of millions.

Many of these individuals continue to exert a powerful influence on the institutional church or the subsidiary organizations which are associated with them. It is not just that they are seen as people who have historical significance, but their convictions, writings, practices, examples, and teachings often carry much weight for the churches that honor them. It is inconceivable in most instances that a church or parachurch organization would ever deviate from the direction originally set by any one of these influential individuals. To do so would mean to erase their own distinctiveness which the institutions of Christianity are loath to do. Whenever questions, issues, controversies, or policy matters arise among the churches, orders, missionary societies, and parachurch organizations, it is not the teaching of the scriptures which is the

determining factor in deciding what course of action to take, but primarily the opinions and interpretations of the traditional leaders of the church, and, secondly, of the institutional authorities presently at the helm. For them to stray from the guidelines of the traditional leadership and its present-day representatives is practically impossible. When major changes do take place, it is seldom to follow scriptural instructions, but typically to modernize outmoded practices. (The integration of homosexuals into church leadership is one example.) In general, to stray from their own traditions is far more serious for the churches of Christianity than to stray from the scriptures.

The men Jesus put on pedestals

Jesus never elevated, celebrated, or lifted any man into divine status. The man Jesus most praised was John the Baptizer. He said that he was the greatest among men but quickly added that the least in the Kingdom of Heaven was greater than John. The only men who ever received a special commission from Jesus were the men he first referred to as his students, then as his friends, and finally as his apostles. This final designation of these men, however, was not intended as a term of high honor. Instead, it originally carried with it the sense of *messenger* or *representative*. It referred to the task they were given and was not meant to be the bestowal of a title of royalty.

It was only in later centuries that the word *apostle* would take on the garb of a high religious title. To read that back into the scriptures, however, is to read the word usage of a later generation back into these writings. The apostles of Christ were those men whom he personally chose to be with him from the beginning. They were to be the students and eyewitnesses of his life and make sure that their testimonies were made available to all nations.

The apostles themselves made it plain that neither their names nor those of any man were to be misused in a polarizing or spotlighted way. We know this because exactly this practice was a problem in the city of Corinth in the first century. In the initial part of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians he chides the various groups for picking out a man to be their special leader. His point is simply that no man can or should in any way take the place of Jesus Christ. It is best for mere men to remain mere men. There is no reason to make any man the focal point of any followers of Jesus. That place is reserved for Christ alone.

Paying homage to men distorts the true nature of man

How men pay homage to other men can be observed right now within the walls of any institutional church. One need only observe how church members address church leaders or how people of various religious stripes greet and speak to men who are religious higher-ups. Note how the Catholics speak to their pope, to their cardinals, bishops, and priests. Note how they greet them. Note how Protestants greet and refer

to their bishops, superintendents, priests, and pastors. How often do they use religious titles? How often do they bend and bow? How often do they confer on them the predicate of “reverend?” Reverend is a particularly interesting address which literally means *to be revered*. Why should a mere man ever be accorded reverence? Note how often people subjugate themselves to religious leaders during ceremonies and rituals. Note how often people allow themselves to be relegated to a place of the laity and separated from the clergy.

Now contrast all this for a moment with how Jesus Christ conducted himself around people. He didn’t expect reverential treatment; he wore no special clothes or insignias; he put on no airs; he sported no high title. And all this even though Jesus was one who truly did have magnificent titles — *Son of God, Son of Man, the Messiah, the Christ*. Rather than insisting on titles such as these, however, it was his practice to use a very common name, *Jesus*, when among people. His own students most often simply called him *teacher* as did many others.

Paul, too, though he was a Pharisee and “Hebrew of Hebrews,” left his Jewish name and titles behind and became known by a common Greek name. In fact, much like his Lord, he was much more despised during his lifetime than given honors. Even many to whom he gave much and for whom he sacrificed much turned against him or left him. The same was true of Jesus. A deep-seated, practical humility was the mark of both men.

Paying homage to men is a way of elevating oneself

All cultures have a way of expressing the deplorable yet all too common act of *buttering up* a person, of *kissing up* to someone, or of *feathering one’s own cap* with the reputation of another. They do it in the hope that some advantage will be achieved or that some of the attraction of an important person will rub off on them.

Jesus did not pay homage to men in this way, nor did the man whom Jesus said was the greatest among men: John the Baptizer. It is enlightening for anyone who values the truth to observe how John spoke with the influential and important men of his day. In one instance he called the religious leaders a brood of vipers. In the presence of Herod Antipas, the Tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea, John called him an adulterer. There was no buttering up going on here. Not even the pomp and circumstance of the royal court could cow John into speaking a few complimentary words to the ruler.

Jesus was no less direct in his choice of words than was John. He, too, minced no words with the Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, or Rabbis. Pontius Pilate, the Roman Primate, was afforded almost no notice. A few words is all he heard from Jesus. Jesus spoke to Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, practically like one would speak with a child.

Paul, too, was direct in his dealings with men. He showed little fear of government officials, Jewish leaders, soldiers, or community leaders. Even Peter, the most prominent among the apostles, was called on the carpet by Paul when he thought he was exhibiting hypocrisy in his treatment of non-Jews.

Paying homage to men is often reflected in the religious language men use toward God

Jesus never fell into the religious rhetoric of typical church leaders who commonly use high-sounding words and phrases: *Almighty God, Maker of heaven and earth, we humbly beseech Thee ...* Who has not heard such inflated talk coming from a pulpit or a chancel? It is the language of religion. It is the language of a man who sees himself as a mediator between a distant god and a dependent laity. Though addressed to God, it is language that tries to impress its listeners with its grandeur and its importance.

Jesus never used this kind of rhetoric nor did he encourage people to use it either with God or with himself. He once asked a man who referred to him as “good master“ why he used the word *good*. He told his students to not be like the hypocrites who like to stand up in front of people and be seen exercising their piety. Instead he encouraged the personal prayer in one’s own private sphere away from prying eyes. This approach to God is totally without religious trappings.

The language Jesus used when referring to God was shocking to the Jews of his day. He referred to God simply as his Father. He even used an Aramaic term that a child would use when referring to a father. For the Jews this was unthinkable. It bombarded their minds with images far too personal and intimate to be tolerated. They would not even dare to pronounce the name of God. Yet, this personal access to God the Father was precisely the message of Jesus.

There is very little about the scriptures that would make them elitist in any way. They were written in the common language of the day. Though it has come to be known as Koine Greek, at the time of its writing it was the street language of people from many lands and areas. Technically, it was a simplified form of the Greek language that we know from the great Greek classics. From the time of Alexander the Great in the fourth century BC, this easier form of Greek had spread as far west as Spain and as far east as India. It became a lingua franca, one of those languages that many cultures and peoples use to communicate outside of their own linguistic sphere.

The scriptures could have been written in the venerated old Hebrew of the Jewish scriptures or they could have been written in the Aramaic, the language of the Jewish people. But the choice of the men who were the eyewitnesses of Christ was Koine Greek, and this choice of language is as remarkable as is every other nonreligious teaching and example of Jesus. It made the scriptures accessible not to specialists only

or to a select cultural group, but to a large population of Greek speakers and readers in dozens of lands and cultures.

It is characteristic of a religion that a certain secrecy and inaccessibility is accorded the information sources. This gives the priests and authorities the “confidential, high-security information” that they need to insure that the laity always has to go through them to get a word from the gods. If the sources were freely available, there would be no leverage. If, however, people need interpreters or guides, they can be made dependent and beholden to these specialists. This is one of the main ways that religious leaders maintain power over their constituencies.

The Roman Catholic Church is a classic example of an institution using linguistic domination to cement its power and authority. For a thousand years, Roman Catholicism kept the scriptures in a lock-tight Latin version that could only be accessed through its priests. Translating into other languages was forbidden. (See page 107 and following in volume II, *Ten Ways to Improve New Testament Translations*.) Today, Bible translations which are still patterned after Latin forerunners fulfill a similar role. Pastors and priests are jealous of their right to teach and interpret them.

With Jesus Christ, there was never meant to be something like an uninformed or dependent laity. The key role defining the relationship Jesus desired with his followers was not the priest but the student. He wanted people to hear and understand his words. He meant for each person to grow in wisdom and knowledge. He was not interested in having intermediaries who constantly needed to be consulted. He wanted people to have a first-hand, personal relationship with his words.