

Jesus allergies

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Most American Christians would probably say that at the center of the Christian life is the Bible, and being biblical. Most are convinced that being biblical separates the sheep from the goats, but this is not so. The problem with this framing is not that a 'biblical orientation' demands too much but that in reality it demands too little. It is too vague rather than too specific. It still remains a wide path rather than the narrow one. Merely using the term biblical does not necessarily call one to the concrete and particular life set free by our Creator. In fact, people have used the Bible to justify almost every way of life. Rarely in the Church in the West has what has been considered 'biblical' aligned very well with a life formed after the birth, ministry, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Too often, claims of living biblically has left those unwilling to accept the costs of following Jesus with creative theological justifications for having discipleship to Jesus allergies.

Don't act like you don't know what I'm talking about. There's a good chance that all around you folks are suffering from discipleship to Jesus allergies. It's a terrible illness. And it seems to spread in the Church like weeds. This allergy solely targets those that self-identify themselves as Christians, believers, the baptized, or those born again. Keep an eye out for anyone with the following symptoms. And if you don't see anyone around with symptoms then it probably means you need to make a run to the emergency room because you got the bug! So the symptoms are twofold—people claiming strong allegiance to Christ by name and yet when confronted with the actual life and teachings of Jesus this allergy erupts like a sneeze, compulsively forcing these poor souls into seeking every 'biblical' possibility available to them so that they can avoid the inconvenience of ever actually following Jesus concretely. Many people who call on the Hallowed Name find themselves marginalizing the Lord whom they claim to be central to their lives. The American Way always takes priority. Suddenly, and abruptly, Jesus is no longer their Lord and highest authority. In these moments of allergic reaction Jesus is no longer the ultimate interpreter of scripture but instead the Bible becomes a tool to cherry pick random verses so that one can systematically reject or marginalize Jesus' call to

follow in his footsteps. The discipleship to Jesus allergy results in Christians who love talking about Jesus, but reject participating in the subversive kingdom life that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John bore witness to.

So in that way the term Biblical has the potential to mask all sorts of behaviors that don't look anything like Jesus, but claim them to somehow to be "Christian". Truth is we all have those particular areas in our lives that we are more than willing to deny Jesus' lordship while looking for some kind of biblical faith as an avoidance technique to Christ who holds all things together in himself. In our country, the easiest example is the 250 years of formal and legalized slavery. At the time, Christians were divided. The Disciples of Christ that argued for the abolition of slavery, among other ways, did so by appealing to Jesus' life and teachings. On the other hand, those that wanted to uphold slavery went searching for biblical texts they could use to trump Jesus so that he would not have the last word on the subject. They, strangely enough, put the Old Testament and Paul's letters against Jesus rather than understanding Jesus as the fulfillment of them all.

How do we compare? Unfortunately, while almost everyone would disdain the practice of slavery now in the Church, very few have questioned this approach of marginalizing Jesus when convenient, so that being Christian (which means being like Christ) very rarely looks much like Christ anymore. We still have refused to take seriously Jesus' engagement with the people in his society. His prophetic stance in relationship to the sociopolitical and religious establishment, his identification with the most vulnerable, his refusal to engage in retaliatory violence but instead pursuing peace and people's restoration through deliverance or repentance. Certainly our understanding today around what God is up to today is shaped more by conservative or liberal ideologies that white dominant culture norms than by the kind of life Jesus embodies in our holy scripture.

Though Jesus preached "good news for the poor" and taught us to pray for our enemies, in America you can preach 'a message of scapegoating the poor' while endorsing a violent Roman empire-like presence globally through ever increasing militarization yet not think twice about calling oneself Christian. Rather than following and being conformed after Christ, we read the biblical narrative as though Christ has not come, as though the plot and storyline has not dramatically changed in light of his arrival. However he has come and we must always read all of scripture in light of that reality if we are to consider our reading a Christian one. The way of Christ is costly, so we like Peter find ourselves caught up with an impulse to

conveniently deny Jesus when his path subverts our habits and our society's inclinations, even if it is anti-Christ, death-dealing ways of living that are opposed to Jesus' resurrected and delivering presence in the world. As the Church we have found clever biblical justifications and maneuvers for displacing Christ from being our center. May God deliver us from our Jesus allergies!