On the shelf: Jesus Made in America, by Stephen J. Nichols

By Steve Thorngate

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"Jesus, like most cultural heroes, is malleable," writes Stephen J. Nichols. "And his given shape has much more to say about the shapers than it does of him." *Jesus Made in America* presents itself as a look at how the Jesus of American history has been shaped and reshaped by culture. It's an ambitious project, and Nichols generally delivers, offering a lively, whirlwind overview.

Woven into this cultural history is a polemic against expressions of Jesus that don't emphasize propositional orthodoxy. This fits roughly with Nichols's acknowledgement that his project is distinct from similar work in that it's evangelical in focus (a point absent from the title or back-cover summary). Still, the book's dual aims lead Nichols, a professor at Lancaster Bible College, to some odd places.

Nichols presents the Jesuses of American history—the Jacksonian frontiersman, the modernist moral exemplar, today's buddy-boyfriend—as incomplete, even dangerously wrong. The Puritans, however, had it just about right. Nichols allows that they were at times lacking in their practical application, what with the slaughter of American Indians and the witch trials and all that. But he presents the Puritans as the overall standard for integrating doctrine, experience and action.

It hardly seems fair to dismiss most ideas as culturally conditioned but then exempt those you happen to agree with. The Puritan leaders may have been intellectual giants, but were they somehow immune to culture? It'd be nice if Nichols scrutinized the creed-obsessed, left-brained biases of Western theology generally in anything like the way he does the heterodoxy of William Ellery Channing or the doctrinal paucity of praise songs.

Similarly frustrating is Nichols's chapter on Jesus films, which he says "tend to have more to say about the cultural moment that produced them than…the moment captured on the page in the Gospels." A disinterested cultural critic would say something similar about *writing,* including the Gospels themselves, instead of

blaming a particular medium. Nichols trashes Martin Scorcese's *The Last Temptation of Christ,* selectively recounting its controversial ending (as have many before). Somewhat less predictably, he also blames Scorcese for *Nixon,* which is actually by Oliver Stone. Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* goes unmentioned, perhaps because it doesn't fit into Nichols's idea that Jesus films tend to be biblically unfaithful and theologically thin. (It can't be because the film isn't from the States, since the French-Canadian *Jesus of Montreal* gets plenty of attention.)

The chapter on Christian pop music is better, providing a fascinating look at how the bold music of the Jesus People gave way to tamer stuff. Soon, however, Nichols lumps MercyMe's praise chorus "I Can Only Imagine" with the secular "crossover music" of the 1990s—it's all simply bad for lack of doctrine. I suppose it's impressive that, here and elsewhere, Nichols reduces to nothing the distance between popular evangelicalism and secular culture, between experiential fervor and cold rationalism. Of course, he does this only to take aim at the lot of it for failing to be Jonathan Edwards.

If you want to read an internal critique of evangelical culture, this is an entertaining and interesting one. What it isn't is a fair-minded cultural history of Jesus in America.