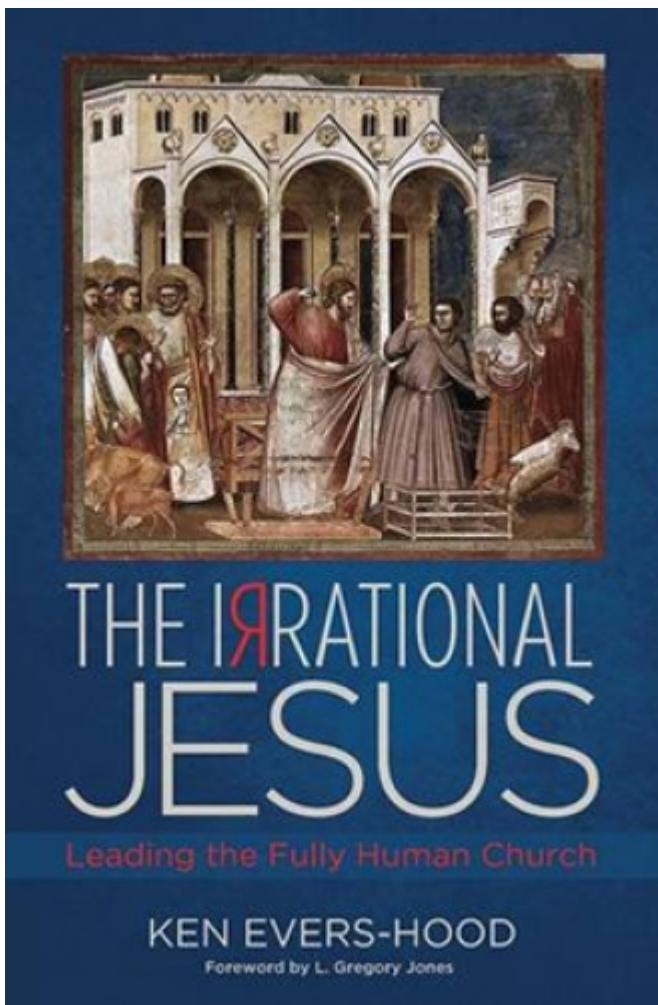


The emotional wisdom of irrational Christians

Ken Evers-Hood applies behavioral economic theories to Jesus—and the people who follow him.

by [Lawrence Wood](#) in the [August 16, 2017](#) issue

In Review



The Irrational Jesus

Leading the Fully Human Church

By Ken Evers-Hood

Cascade Books

Here is a brave, wise book—brave in its use of jargon, and braver still in its portrait of a human Jesus. Ken Evers-Hood, a pastor in Oregon, has absorbed the complex lessons of behavioral economists and translated them to his own work in the parish. Recognizing that congregational life takes place between *is* and *ought*—probably more is than ought—he has learned to accept parishioners as they are, and to admit his own habits of mind so he may become a better leader. “We can be taught!” he says.

Yet for every insight, he must explain himself. The word *irrational*, for example: rather than unreasonable or wild, it means to a behavioral economist anything other than a cold calculation of self-interest. Parishioners may have very good reasons—reasons of the heart—for resisting a leader’s initiatives. Evers-Hood is at his best when he describes such emotional wisdom.

“Theologians and pastors often behave like classical economists,” he says. “We develop ideas, often biblically based ideas, about how people *should* behave. But then, of course, the reality of serving in actual churches is that people rarely behave as they should.” He adds, “This is actually fantastic news,” for when people disregard their self-interest, the gospel can happen.

Other terms he must unpack include “heuristics,” “Schelling points,” “decision quality chain,” “modified behavioral chain,” and “tornado diagram,” along with the finer points of mathematical game theory. It takes a dogged reader to stay with him. But he rewards the effort with great stories—parables, if you will—in which the joke is on him. This is a good move for someone who could otherwise come off as too clever by half.

In one delightful passage Evers-Hood recalls coming to his present church and learning that a longtime feature of Sunday worship has been “the birthday chicken.” People celebrating birthdays put an offering in a chicken-shaped basket, the congregation sings “Happy Birthday,” and the pastor gives them a blessing. After his first Sunday, a lay leader told him everything was great . . . except that he had done the chicken wrong. The birthday chicken does not appear in any Presbyterian book of worship.

Not exactly enamored of this strange holdover from the previous pastor, Evers-Hood came to resent it, and after a few years he admitted as much to another member. She told him how much the blessing meant to her in adulthood. She explained that when Evers-Hood touched her and said the Aaronic benediction, she felt holy and loved. “What seemed silly to me held profound meaning for her and many others,” says Evers-Hood. “I have never since complained about the birthday chicken.” Yes, to new pastors this is old advice dressed up in the garb of business theory. Good and timeless though it is, I find it less interesting than the author’s argument about Jesus’ humanity. In the heart of a practical book on leadership, Evers-Hood daringly asserts that the Jesus of the New Testament, like any of us, has “cognitive biases” that mark him as a man of his time and place. Evers-Hood looks long and hard at passages that many Christians would just as soon ignore. Instead of troubling him, these passages reassure him that Jesus is “predictably irrational”:

The evangelists offer portraits of Jesus honest enough to show the presence of powerful emotion, a limited ability to foresee the future, physical limitation, and a remarkable lack of self-interest. I’m not saying Jesus is entirely unhinged. But in his full humanity, Jesus is limited by time and place and by imperfect information, and he experiences the same heuristic shortcuts and predictable blind spots as the rest of us. An irrational Jesus may sound like bad news, but it isn’t. . . . The irrational humanity that causes Jesus to make mistakes and regrettable statements is the same irrational humanity that generates his compassion and hunger for justice.

Predictable, a word from behavioral economics, seems about the last adjective one would apply to Jesus; surely it’s enough to say that he is fully human. Evers-Hood argues that if we can accept an emotional, sometimes mistaken Jesus, and perhaps even find comfort in Jesus’ humanity, then we might accept our own humanity as leaders of very human congregations.