

A Branding Issue (Part One)

“Do not judge, or you too will be judged”

Reflection 6 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

We are still relatively early into our series, “New World in the Morning.” And this series, though it goes on to imagine the glorious possibilities of a great global spiritual awakening, begins with the fact of declining church attendance all across America, in part, because Christianity has a major branding problem. Diana Butler Bass in her book, *Christianity after Religion* (p. 58), notes that for a great many people traditional religious labels now carry negative images. Even the word “Christian” is identified by many with its most narrow, right-wing extremists. So more and more those deeply committed to Christianity will call themselves other things, “Christ followers” or “disciples of Christ,” all in an effort to say, “But our church isn’t like that! It’s not what you think. We’re trying to be something different. I’m trying to be someone different.”

If this is an issue across all age groups, it’s especially an issue for young people today who often see the church as, well, mainly judgmental – which often, way too often, it is. Most twentysomethings find this revolting. And so the church has a branding issue, but much of the problem has to do with how much branding the church has done. It does not have to be this way. It was never meant to be this way.

Consider Jesus saying, “Do not judge,” in Matthew 7:1-5. When I was young, I was taught to judge. The church I grew up in taught me to judge. In fact, I thought the church’s mission was to judge. Almost every religious comment I heard was judgment. Everything was either right or wrong. Everybody was either right or wrong. So what did Jesus mean when he told us, “Do not judge”?

Richard Hughes in his book *Reviving the Ancient Faith* identifies what he calls a “hard style” in our own heritage. It rose out of rough-and-tumble frontier society in Texas in the 1880s, and it speaks the language of the shoot-out; it’s filled with gunfighter imagery. And it’s always branding. It vilifies and demonizes those one disagrees with. It simply assumes bad faith on the part of others. It is marked by deceit and dishonesty, quoting others out of context, mastering innuendo, feeding on malicious rumors, completely misrepresenting truth, making up stories to discredit others. It seeks to silence all dissent and diversity. It spies “on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and [seeks to] make us slaves again” (Galatians 2:4). Its practitioners are, simply put, the “ferocious wolves” Jesus warns about (Matthew 7:15), hunting, biting, and seeking to devour and disembowel. Of course that is not just true of us. It’s true of many churches. It’s certainly true of politics. In fact, it’s true of humanity wherever it is unredeemed by the spirit of Jesus.

In fact, we still live in an exceedingly judgmental society. For all the talk of tolerance, for all the alleged secularism and moral laxity in our society, public discourse from Fox News and MSNBC to talk radio is filled with moralizing, with judgment, with finger-pointing and blaming, with slander and contempt, with labeling and polarizing, with

moral busybodies with this kind of fierce alienating certainty in their eyes. So what did Jesus mean when he told us, “Do not judge”?

While society and certainly politics get meaner all the time (at least over the course of my lifetime), I am glad that the church of my youth has become kinder, and we – at least many of us – have learned over the years to not condemn others, to not write people off, to not suppose ourselves to be the gatekeepers or census takers for Heaven and Hell. We have learned Peter’s lesson as he contemplated what to do with a Roman centurion named Cornelius – that we are not to call any person impure or unclean (Acts 10:28). We have also learned that almost all judgment involves a credibility problem, some measure of hypocrisy. As Jesus notes in Matthew 7, drawing on his years in the carpentry shop, there we are with a plank in our eyes fixated on the speck of dust in our brother’s eye. It’s really kind of funny – some guy with a plank in his eye trying to extract this speck of dust from someone else’s eye. And we’ve even learned that this may apply to matters far larger than specks of dust, that Jesus (and I draw here on John 7:53-8:11) when confronted one day in the temple courts with a woman caught in adultery unexpectedly took her side, exposed the hypocrisy of her accusers (“Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.”), protected her, and though he clearly told her to go and leave her life of sin, he also made very clear that he did not condemn her. And so we have learned all these things, and in our better moments we know that when we are inclined to judge someone we seldom have all the facts. We seldom see the whole picture. And the person we’re tempted to condemn we might just applaud if we knew all they’d been through.

But were these the points that Jesus was making when he was teaching that crowd of Palestinian Jews that day 2000 years ago on that hillside in Galilee and said, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you”? It’s important to remember the historic moment: an occupied land seething under Roman oppression, with unrest and revolt in the air, a people aroused by militant Jewish nationalism. And on one level Jesus is saying in his Sermon on the Mount, “That’s not the way!” And in this context, with life and death on the line, he says: Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are the peacemakers. Don’t retaliate. Love your enemies. Forgive those who wrong you. And now do not judge. The way things seem to you may not be the way they really are. Remember even your oppressors – these Roman soldiers – have a basic humanity. They are sons, and fathers, and husbands, and brothers, and friends. They are filled with the same fears and hopes as you. And for goodness sake, don’t forget that with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. And it was a generation later when the legions of Rome crushed Jewish dissent.

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week.