



1

CHAIN OF FOOLS

Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains
—Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*¹

They were the worst words I have ever heard someone say about Jesus. I have heard people say some very negative things about Jesus. Still, I had never in my life heard anyone say such hideous stuff about him as I was getting from a young man who happens to be very dear to me.

What bothered me most wasn't his rejection of everything that I knew he had learned about Jesus, but the expression of his rejection with such contempt and verbal ugliness. It wasn't just that he was denying that Jesus ever existed, or that he was asserting that people who believe in Jesus have placed their faith in a lie. It was that he laced his ideas with hatred and profanity. He wasn't merely rejecting Jesus. He was angry, and he was, most of all, hurt. Since he and I first began our ongoing conversations, I have come to see that his posture toward Jesus is connected to a growing sentiment about Jesus and Christianity across the world, especially in America.

Let's tell a hard truth. There is a massive gap between what Christians claim about Jesus and his actual influence in the world. That gap is the *demon* behind the words and disposition of this young man and the growing resentment, especially among young people, toward Jesus.

1. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, G.D. H. Cole, trans. (Augustine Press, 1923/2018), 12.

Jesus came to set us free. He is the One sent by God to liberate, heal, and restore us from the things that have blinded, broken, divided, and chained us. Yet, all over the world, it appears that Jesus' impact is impeded. Given what Jesus' followers believe and claim about him, why does he seem to have only a marginal impact upon not only the world and but even those of us who call him "Savior"? Is Jesus chained?

Our claims about Jesus' identity and power are bold. We believe that, through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus has redeemed fallen creation and reconciled the world back to God. We believe that Jesus lives within and through us who have, by grace, received Jesus into our lives and surrendered to him as Lord. We believe that Jesus is at work through us to fulfill his prayer that his Kingdom is fulfilled on earth (Matthew 6:10). We live confidently in Jesus' post-resurrection proclamation: "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth." (Matthew 28:18).

Our celebration of Jesus and his power are pervasive. All over the world, people worship and celebrate Jesus. His name is on church buildings and church logos. He is studied, interpreted, and reinterpreted. His life and legacy fill the curricula of seminary classrooms. All over the world, people sing, preach, and teach about Jesus. Movements and wars happen in his name. *Gazillions* of dollars have been raised and spent in his name. He tops most lists of the most influential persons in human record. People have died for him and killed for him. His death is the hinge of history for the most widely used calendar in the world (the Gregorian calendar). On the surface, it seems as if Jesus is everywhere, influencing everything. If we measure by size, power, wealth, and influence, it appears that Jesus and the Church are winning.

Yet, when we look deeper and longer, we see something entirely different. In this moment of history, the whole world is taking a deeper, more comprehensive look, facilitated by the enormous resources of 24-hour cable media and social media. As the world looks at Jesus and the Church, there is growing doubt about Jesus' relevance, power, and impact beyond the internal religious practices and beliefs of formal, institutional Christianity. Beneath the surface, there is deep trouble in the *paradise* of Christendom, and the world is asking us, the Church, some severe and substantive questions.

Some of these are the typical questions that have been raised for ages. If the risen Jesus is all-powerful and unlimited in love, why are so

many things going wrong in the world and human history? Does Jesus care, or does he care but isn't able to do anything about these troubles? Why doesn't Jesus stop the senseless wars fought for no better reason than egos and lust for power or wealth? Why doesn't Jesus stop abortions? Why doesn't Jesus stop the school shootings that take the lives of innocent, helpless children? How did the Holocaust happen in a world where Jesus is the ultimate authority and power?

Where was Jesus during the chattel enslavement of Black Americans or the mass genocide of Native Americans? Why didn't Jesus protect the nine black Christians gathered to learn about him in the church in Charleston, South Carolina? Where is Jesus when some of the best people we know die, young, from cancer while some of the worst people we know prosper in every visible way? We could go on.

However, the most pressing questions these days are questions about how Christians, in general, are so far removed from the Jesus we read about in the Gospels. If *that* Jesus is now the risen Lord and lives through his followers, then why do we bear so little resemblance to him in our choices, behaviors, and lifestyles? Beneath our *church-ism* (songs, liturgies, meetings, revivals, conferences, life groups, ministries, offerings, collections, and beautiful buildings), it doesn't appear that we are genuinely formed and transformed by the character, values, mission, and passion of Jesus. Beneath *church-ism*, Christians are known the world over for being the best at some of the worst behaviors: hatred, war, judgmentalism, condemnation, racism, greed, and idolatries of all kinds.

For example, over the last half-century, the organization most known for being guilty of the sexual abuse of young boys is the Catholic Church. The absurd conspiracy theories of QAnon are rooted and nurtured in the American Protestant Church. Why? Why is it that in so many predominantly black communities, drugs and gang violence multiply despite a church on nearly every corner? How can these things be? It is one thing for Christians to misbehave. We are not perfect. It is quite another thing to become the hosts, curators, and protectors of evil, which we seem to be in so many cases. Where is Jesus? Why does his impact on us seem to be diminishing?

Many of Jesus' followers are very much like an adulteress wife visiting her lover with her husband's name tattooed on multiple places of

her body. We wear the name of Jesus all over us while our lives, choices, values, and passions contradict our label.

And we are at war with each other. We are “a house divided against itself.” We are more defined by and loyal to our political parties and political values than to Jesus and his Kingdom. We can worship together until it’s election time. We can engage in mission work together until we discover that someone is a liberal or a conservative. We all wear Jesus’ name but seem to desert him when he gets in the way of our social, cultural, economic, and political agendas, at which point, we are more than ready to—at worst—destroy each other and—at best—demonize each other. It seems that Jesus’ claim on many of his followers is merely “skin-deep.”

Christians don’t seem to have even a broad consensus about what it means to be a Christian.

Over the past few years, as I have focused on the life and meaning of Jesus, I have informally polled Christians, curious to see how they think of and understand Jesus. I have asked people, “What does it mean to be a Christian?” Seldom did I get the answer that “being a Christian means to be a follower of Jesus.”

I have served on boards of ordained ministry in The United Methodist Church. It is surprising how many candidates I helped interview who could not adequately answer this question: “What is the central claim of the Christian faith?” They didn’t give bad answers, but many of them didn’t know that the central claim of the Christian faith is “Jesus Christ is Lord.” Many of them were nearly clueless about what it is that essentially defines us as Christians.

A good friend of mine, a pastor, tried to explain the results I was getting. “Until recently,” she said, “following Jesus or Jesus being Lord over my life had never occurred to me in my decision to be a Christian. For most of my life, including after joining a local church, I thought that being a Christian meant joining a Christian community, going to worship services every week, participating in a Bible study, tithing, and being a morally good person. Becoming like Jesus, imitating Jesus, letting Jesus live his life through me was not in my consciousness.” She went on to say, “I’ll bet that my experience is true for most people who call themselves Christians.” If we measure her assertion by the depth of Jesus’ actual influence on Christians (and the world), I’ll bet that she’s right.

Observing our behavior as Christians, it is as if we have taken Jesus' name and identity and are using them in ways foreign to who Jesus was and is.

Personal-identity theft has always been a threat, but with the onset and exponential growth of the internet, it has become common and normalized. Through a host of methods and strategies, thieves can steal your identity and act in the world as if they are you. Using your identity, they might do anything from making false unemployment claims to creating credit lines and running up illegitimate debt. These people adopt your identity and then do all kinds of evil as you.

It is not outrageous to assert that Jesus' identity has been taken over and perverted so much so that, in many circles of the Church, the Jesus presented is a dark caricature, grotesque imitation, or complete misrepresentation of who Jesus really was and is. Those circles of the Church are perpetrating "spiritual crimes" in the name and person of Jesus.

False Renditions of Jesus

As false versions of Jesus have multiplied, they are like chains imposed on Jesus' impact, repressing, restraining, and restricting his influence on all of creation. What's more, the caricatures of Jesus come in many shapes and sizes. In America, alone, there is a host of perverted versions of Jesus.

There's the *jesus* who has been stripped of any of the physical attributes of his actual ethnicity and culture and portrayed as a white, blond-haired, blue-eyed European, which, of course, doesn't matter, unless it matters.

There's *jesus*, the American nationalist, who is always pro-American and who leads his followers to assert and protect the primacy of America over all the world by any means necessary. Furthermore, what these *jesus* followers love most about him is that they never have to question if *jesus* is on their side. They can always assume and be confident that he is.

There's the white supremacist *jesus*, defender, sustainer, and symbol of white colonialism and white privilege. He led the charge in the genocide, oppression, enslavement, desecration, and colonizing of Native Americans. He permitted the purchase, transportation, and chattel enslavement of Africans. He inspired the creation of the Ku Klux Klan.

He signed the postcards that white hate-mobs created to send to friends when they lynched innocent Black Americans. He cares deeply for the pain and suffering of white Americans but has no compassion for the suffering of persons of color. At times in American history, he has infiltrated the white Church to give religious sanctioning of white violence and hatred.

There's the black militant *jesus*, whose followers live their lives and build their theological perspectives more as angry reactions to white racism than as hope-filled responses to God.

There's the *jesus* who has become the “god of greed and materialism,” who measures everything, including success and the quality of people's faith, by market value and wealth accumulation. This *jesus* even shows up in many churches, inspiring the “name-it-and-claim it” prosperity gospel and guiding other followers to measure the impact of churches by the size of their sanctuaries and other church buildings.

There are more:

- the *jesus* of relentless individualism, for whom everything is a private matter
- the spiritual *jesus*, who has no interest in changing his followers' circumstances
- the heavenly *jesus*, whose only concern is what will happen to people after they die
- the various versions of an emotionally vague *jesus*, who is always mad, sad, passive, or boring
- the *jesus*, who was concerned only about matters of established religion
- the *jesus*, who is just a moral teacher or rebel Jewish philosopher
- the *jesus*, whose only value and significance is his crucifixion
- the *jesus*, who was human in appearance only (Docetism lives on)
- the *jesus*, who lived without struggle or challenge
- the *jesus*, who would never cause conflict
- the *jesus*, who is available only for Christians, the Church,

and those people who are willing to conform to the Church's moral and cultural codes of conduct

- the *jesus*, who exists only inside of a church-building
- the denominational *jesuses*, (Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, etc.)

The list of false *jesuses* is endless, with every subculture of American society conceiving and forging its own version of Jesus: Democrats, Republicans, Conservatives, Liberals, promoters of guns, and promoters of social welfare. Name an extreme in America, and you can bet that there's an associated *jesus*, who cultivates a version of Christianity that serves it.

I have mentioned only the distortions of Jesus deriving from people who have a positive disposition toward him. There are also numerous *jesuses* created and defined by people who despise the person, story, and even the idea of Jesus.

Of course, the forging of false *jesuses* is not an action unique to America. It happens worldwide, wherever the story of Jesus is known and where people attempt to apply the story of Jesus to how they live their lives.

My quick mention of these renditions of Jesus is not by way of a casual dismissing of their impact and influence. There is real power in these distortions because they have a bit of truth connected to them; in this era, you don't need a whole truth to be convincing to the masses. A bit of truth wedded to a lot of unbridled passion has proven capable of launching revolutions, toppling governments, overturning long-established traditions, and collapsing economies.

The young man I mentioned in the beginning was rejecting a caricature of Jesus and not Jesus as he truly is. He was angry with a *jesus* who:

- has white hair and blue eyes
- is a creation of white American slave owners
- supported slavery and the destruction of Black people
- took his mom from him, unfairly
- doesn't answer prayer

- identifies with white supremacy
- is a puppet-tool of the Black Church to take advantage of Black people
- probably never existed, and if he did is, most certainly, dead.

His kind of resentment happens when the Church doesn't tell the truth about Jesus and instead creates versions of him that support our addictions, dark passions, and twisted agendas.

So, although Jesus is known all over the world, the numerous distortions of him have significantly impeded his impact. **He came to set us free, yet his influence and impact seem to be hindered, opposed, and stifled everywhere. It is as if his impact is in chains.** Those of us who love him and follow him, who still believe that he is the Light of the world, need to engage in a relentless effort to remove the barriers to Jesus' influence that we have erected and *re-present* him to the world, *unchained* from the confusing, perverted renditions of him. We must bear witness to Jesus with less distortion and with greater clarity.

I once dreamed that I was walking through a forest with a pastor who remains one of my mentors. As we made our way through the thick forest, we started seeing giant snakes in the trees. Suddenly afraid, we began to sprint to get out of the woods, but the snakes began falling out of the trees, and one of them fell on my mentor and started wrapping itself around him. He broke free, but just as he did, another snake fell on him, and then another one, and another one. I stood there, locked in terror, wanting to help him but feeling helpless. As the snakes were enveloping him, I turned to start running to save my own life.

The next day, I reached out to a good friend of mine, a prayer warrior whose counsel I deeply trusted, and asked him to help me interpret that dream. He told me that the dream meant that my mentor would come under a spiritual attack and that, when it happens, I was to "stay in the forest" and help him get free. I took his interpretation as a helpful one, but I felt that there was more.

Now, I think that dream is about a lot of things and a lot of people. I think that evil *snakes* are wrapping themselves around a lot of God's people and squeezing out God's blessings. I know that there are times in my life when I am the one on whom the snakes are falling, and I need people to help me get free.

Jesus is being attacked by *snakes* of distortion, misrepresentation, and unbelief. Of course, these snakes can't get to Jesus himself, but they are wrapping themselves around his influence, choking the strength out of his impact in the world.

As my prayer-warrior friend counseled me years ago, I will stay in the fight and the faith, and as Jesus lives through me, bear witness to the *true* Jesus, to help the influence and sway of Jesus in the world break free from the snakes of distortion and misrepresentation.

This book is one attempt to aid in the work of setting Jesus' influence free. In this book, I'll attempt to present a holistic picture of Jesus as he is witnessed to in the Bible, especially the four Gospels, with the ultimate goal of helping us to *see* him, encounter him, and be transformed by him.

The truth is that it isn't Jesus who is chained; we are. Our idolatries, wicked agendas, and selfish ambitions have chained us and made us unable to embrace Jesus' presence and power. I pray that this book will help us see our idolatries and show us a clearer picture of Jesus. Maybe if we can see Jesus clearer and better, we will fully embrace him and allow him to transform us into the beautiful beings God created us to be!

Before we turn to the Bible and work toward a holistic vision of Jesus, I must tell you why I love Jesus and why I believe he's "worth fighting for." He is not only the Light of the world; he is the Light of my heart.