

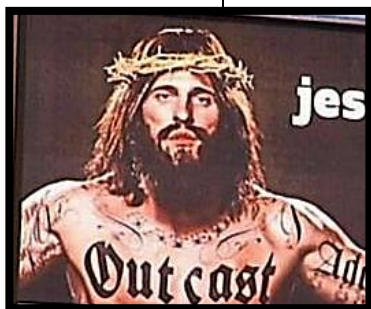
The Scandal of Christ

Why Jesus' Nonconformity Is a Reason to be Thankful

Last month a series of billboards went up in the town of Lubbock, Texas that have caused quite stir in the community and on the internet. The billboards depict a person portraying Jesus who is covered in tattoos. The tattoos across his body contain words like outcast, hated, addicted, jealous, and many more. The billboards also direct passersby to jesus-tattoo.org where a video can be seen of someone portraying Jesus running a tattoo parlor where individuals come in with tattoos like self-righteous, outcast, and useless, and leave with tattoos such as humble, accepted, and purpose. At the end of the day, all the negative tattoos that were removed from the visitors suddenly and miraculously appear on the actor playing Jesus. The response toward these billboards and toward the internet video have ranged from "blasphemous" to "this is what the gospel is all about".

So what are we to make of such attempts to reach people with the good news of Jesus Christ. Are such videos and billboards going beyond the pale or is this what Paul meant by 'becoming all things to all people so that some might be saved' (1 Cor 9:22)? For starters, the video offers much to be desired in the way of cinematography and production quality. To be fair, the group which produced it is clearly a small organization with limited resources. Thus, they should be commended for their effort and not condemned. It is always easier to criticize those who share the gospel in a manner we disapprove of than to share the gospel ourselves.

The video also presents a truncated view of the gospel message. The video posits that Christ died on the cross in order to demonstrate God's love for us and so that those who come to Him in faith would not be defined within society by the marks of their past mistakes. In reality, however, the gospel is much deeper and much broader.



Nevertheless, the video should be commended for presenting the gospel message in a manner commensurate with the person and work of Jesus Christ—*scandalous*. The manner in which Jesus came into the world was scandalous to the Jews. Here was their long awaited Messiah and King who was miraculously conceived in the womb of an unmarried woman. It's no wonder the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day took potshots at him at every given opportunity. And as if the rumors surrounding his birth were not enough, the town he was raised in could not have been more despised. So poorly was Jesus' hometown thought of that one of his disciples once retorted, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?"

Yet the scandals and controversies did not stop with his birth and upbringing. Unlike the religious leaders of his day, Jesus enjoyed the company of sinners and social outcasts. He was willing to reach out to those who had not felt the affectionate touch of a human hand for years; he ate with those who assisted the Roman government in oppressing the Jews; he came to the defense of known adulterers, and he once allowed a "woman of the city" to wash his feet with her tears of remorse and then wipe them with her hair. To this one of the religious leaders thought, "*If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him*" (Luke 7:39).

Still, the controversies surrounding Christ would continue. The anointed one, the son of King David, the one the Jews expected to appear in triumph and overthrow their Roman oppressors, came riding into Jerusalem, not on a war horse, but on a donkey, was accused of blasphemy, was beaten within an inch of his life by Roman soldiers, and then was nailed to a Roman cross as a public display of humiliation. *Some Messiah*.

But the most scandalous aspect of Jesus' life and death was the fact that this was the very person whom his disciples insisted the Jews must be-

lieve upon, that Jesus was their Messiah, and that his death on the cross was intended to pay the penalty of their sins and for the *sins of the whole world* (1 John 2:2). As if it were not enough that their Savior was hung on a cross and that the salvation predicted by their prophets was a spiritual salvation, not a political one, now they must accept that Christ died for both Jews and non-Jews— *for Germans, Iraqis, and Palestinians*. This is the scandal of Christ. He was a polarizing figure. People loved him or hated him, adored him or despised him, worshipped him or wanted to kill him.

The scandal of Christ is that we tend to want a Savior who is all tidied up in a pretty package of blue eyes, blonde hair, and a white robe. Yet the Bible presents us with a Savior whose appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, who had no form or majesty that we should look upon him, no beauty that we should desire him, who was despised and rejected by men, who bore our guilt and carried our sorrows, and who was wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities' (Isaiah 52:13-53:12). The gospel is messy and, in some respect, very ugly. It is messy and ugly in that Christ hung on a cross not simply because he did not want us to be marked by our past mistakes, but because he took upon himself our sins, and then carried those sins to the cross, and then paid the penalty for those sins that we should have paid for. We are the ones who should have hung on that cross for all eternity. It was our sins that put him there.

This Thanksgiving season, let us be thankful that Christ was not willing to go along with the status quo, that he was unwilling to tow the religious party line, and that he was willing to reach out to sinful outcasts, to reach out to a lost and dying world, to love those who were unlovable, and to desire the undesirable. Let us be thankful that for those who place their faith in Christ, he gives beauty in exchange for ashes, joy in exchange for mourning, and hope in exchange for despair (Isaiah 61:3).

Hexion J. Maldonado is a graduate of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and minister of preaching at Tapestry Community Church in Belton, TX.