



WHO IS THIS MAN?

The Unpredictable Impact
of the Inescapable Jesus

JOHN ORTBERG



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Who Is this Man?

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Foreword

So much has been written about our Lord that one is tempted to ask if there is anything more to say. As the daughter and granddaughter of Presbyterian ministers, I have been a follower of Christ since birth. And yet when I heard John Ortberg's sermons in the series "Who was this Guy?" as a parishioner at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, I turned to my cousin (also a Presbyterian minister's daughter) and said, "I never thought of it that way." Thankfully, our Lord's story continues to be revealed by inspired teachers who tell it in language that brings it to life for our modern, troubled times. In *Who Is This Man?* John has written a powerful testament to the impact that Jesus has had on human history, on the human condition, and on our understanding of the obligations of one human being to another.

This book reminds us first and foremost that Christ was a revolutionary figure. The apostle Paul's summary statement of the faith was a thunderbolt in the ancient world: "In Christ Jesus you are *all* children of God through faith. . . . There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Before that revelation, one's status from birth defined one's life until the grave. But with the coming of Christ, who humbled himself to enter our world as a helpless baby and die like a common criminal, it is now and forever clear that every life is worthy before God. It is from this belief that we conclude, "all men (and women) are created equal."

Through countless biblical stories we are led to understand that Christ did not just say these things; he lived them. He dined with

outcasts, touched the unclean, recruited women into his ministry, revealed himself after the resurrection to these “second-class citizens,” and chastised hypocrites who piously kept the letter of the law but cared little for their brethren. In the end, he would refuse to save himself from death on the cross in order to fulfill the promise of the resurrection—and in doing so, save mankind.

Those who followed him would begin to act as if every life is worthy. The community of people called Christians would minister to the sick and disabled and build hospitals, pursue universal education, spread teaching through universities, and lift up the poor in faraway places, “for they would inherit the earth.”

John Ortberg has demonstrated that nothing in our human existence has been quite the same since that fateful Sunday so long ago. We join Johann Sebastian Bach in saying (as he wrote at the beginning of his compositions), “God help me.” And we glory in the belief that our Lord answers. But we too often fail to say, as Bach did at the end of his magnificent works, “(Everything) To the Glory of God.”

So the real power of this book is in its exploration of the paradox of our faith: that acceptance of the Lord Christ Jesus is not a pathway to an easy life but a call to do hard things if we are to live in the image of our Lord. “Love my enemies?” “Give my riches to the poor and take up the cross?” “Die so that I might live?”

Jesus emerges from this book as a complex figure with a disruptive set of teachings—sometimes “cranky” with those who don’t get it, often tough on his followers, and yet compassionate with those in need. At the end, we want to know him even better.

In *Who Is This Man?* John Ortberg gives those who believe and those who are perhaps not so certain a compelling reason to seek answers. And he reminds us that seek we must, because there has never been a more important question in the history of humankind.

CONDOLEEZZA RICE
Former U.S. Secretary of State



Acknowledgments

The New Testament tells about a group of ten lepers who were cleansed by Jesus; only one came back to say thank you, and that one was a Samaritan. Thus, in a single story, the message of compassion to all who suffer, the inclusion of the outcast, and the beauty of gratitude were unforgettably passed on to the human race.

So this is a “Samaritan moment”—a chance to pause and say thank you to a group of people to whom I owe a very pleasant debt of gratitude. I am most grateful to the church I serve for making time available for me to write. This book grew more than most out of our life together, and I’m thankful for more discussions and feedback around this material than I could count.

Glenn Lucke and the Docent Research group—particularly Sharon Miller—were invaluable partners at helping to locate sources and stories worth exploring. An unforgettable breakfast with historian David Kennedy at the home of Bob and Dottie King (who were generous with their home in many ways) was wonderfully instructive about how historians approach their craft.

My friend Gary Moon is much responsible for this book going the direction that it did rather than down a far different path. Scot McKnight and Mark Nelson gave wise counsel at several junctures. Dallas Willard points to Jesus like no one else I know and helped me in a number of conversations to know where to look for the Jesus “wake” left in the sea of human history.

Chuck Bergstrom and Rick Blackmon were, as always, sounding boards and feedback-givers and, mostly, lifelong friends.

Linda Barker with whom I work is a treasure of both organization and creativity. Blues Baker is not only a great friend but also a teammate in ministry; it's an honor to serve as a cupbearer. Nancy Duarte has been generous in thinking about the message of this book and how it might be communicated in compelling ways; merely entering the space of the Duarte Group can't help but make the enterer more creative.

John Sloan has been more than an editor—a partner and fellow dreamer and lover of thoughts and words. Jim Ruark and Laura Weller gave care and precision to the crafting of each sentence.

Sealy and Curtis Yates came into this journey partway through and made it much more fun and energized than it otherwise would have been.

My daughter, Laura Turner, is gifted as a writer herself and has been a fountain of ideas and feedback for this book.

N. T. Wright was so surprisingly generous with his scholarship and observations and encouragement that I feel compelled to add the time-honored caveat that he is not responsible for any remaining errors but saved me from a number of others.

Sam and Betsy Reeves generously allowed me to use their house for writing. Sam interrupts a lot and is probably responsible for many errors here.

Nancy, after nearly thirty years of marriage, is with me in the thinking and the writing always.

S.D.G.

The Man Who Won't Go Away

On the day after Jesus' death, it looked as if whatever small mark he left on the world would rapidly disappear. Instead, his impact on human history has been unparalleled.

After his disappearance from earth, the days of his unusual influence began. That influence is what this book is about. Rightly seen, this effect on past and current history will cause any thoughtful person — apart from their religious ideas about Christianity — to ask, “Who was this man?”

You can miss him in historical lists for many reasons, perhaps the most obvious being the way he lived his life. Jesus did not loudly and demonstrably defend his movement in the spirit of a rising political or military leader. He did not lay out a case that history would judge his brand of belief superior in all future books. He did not start by telling his disciples, “Here are proofs of my divinity; affirm them and I'll accept you.”

Normally when someone dies, their impact on the world immediately begins to recede. As I write this, our world marks the passing of digital innovator Steve Jobs. Someone wrote that ten years ago our world had Bob Hope, Johnny Cash, and Steve Jobs; now we have no Jobs, no Cash, and no Hope. But Jesus inverted this normal human trajectory, as he did so many others. Jesus' impact was greater a hundred years after his death than during his life; it was greater still after five hundred years; after a thousand years his legacy laid the foundation for much of Europe; after two thousand years he has more followers in more places than ever.

If someone's legacy will outlast their life, it usually becomes apparent when they die. On the day when Alexander the Great or Caesar Augustus or Napoleon or Socrates or Mohammed died, their reputations were immense. When Jesus died, his tiny failed movement appeared clearly at an end. If there were a kind of "Most Likely to Posthumously Succeed" award given on the day of death to history's most influential people, Jesus would have come in dead last.

His life and teaching simply drew people to follow him. He made history by starting in a humble place, in a spirit of love and acceptance, and allowing each person space to respond. He deliberately placed himself on a collision course with Rome, where he would have been crushed like a gnat. And he was crushed.

And yet . . .

Jesus' vision of life continues to haunt and challenge humanity. His influence has swept over history like the tail of a comet, bringing his inspiration to influence art, science, government, medicine, and education; he has taught humans about dignity, compassion, forgiveness, and hope.

Since the day he did come—as G. K. Chesterton put it—"It has never been quite enough to say that God is in his heaven and all is right with the world; since the rumor is that God had left his heavens to set it right."



Jesus is history's most familiar figure. His impact on the world is immense and non-accidental.

Great men have sometimes tried to secure immortality by having cities named after them; the ancient world was littered with cities that Alexander named Alexandria and Caesar named Caesarea. While Jesus was alive, he had no place to live. Yet today I live in the San Francisco Bay area, which has its name because a man named Francis was once a follower of this man Jesus. Our state capital is named Sacramento, because Jesus once had a meal with his followers—the Last Supper—that became known as a Sacrament. You cannot look at a map without being reminded of this man.

Powerful regimes have often tried to establish their importance by

dating the calendar around their existence. Roman emperors would date events according to the years of their reign; they marked past history by the founding of Rome itself. The French Revolution tried to enlighten everyone with a calendar that marked the reign of Reason. The USSR dated time from the deposing of the tsar and theoretically giving power to the people. It formed the “League of the Militant Godless” in the twenties to stamp out faith; a 1929 magazine cover showed two workers dumping Jesus out of a wheelbarrow. But the League’s leader, Yemelian Yaroslavsky, grew frustrated at the stubbornness of faith. “Christianity is like a nail,” he said. “The harder you strike it, the deeper it goes.”

The idea of Jesus trying to impose a calendar on anyone was laughable. The beginning of his ministry was carefully noted by Luke according to the Roman calendar: “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Tracoonitis, and Lysanius tetrarch of Abilene.” From complete obscurity, Jesus came to public attention for the blink of an eye—maybe three years, maybe as few as one. Yet today, every time we glance at a calendar or date a check, we are reminded that chronologically at least, this incredibly brief life has become somehow the dividing line of history.

Famous people often seek to preserve their legacy by having others named for them. The Bible mentions various characters named Herod or even Herodias who were intended to remind us of Herod the Great. On the day after Jesus’ death, no one in the tiny circle that knew his identity was naming their new baby after him. But today the names of Caesar and Nero are used, if at all, for pizza parlors, dogs, and casinos, while the names in Jesus’ book live on and on.

The quickest and most basic mental health assessment checks to see if people are “oriented times three”: whether they know who they are, where they are, and what day it is. I was given the name of Jesus’ friend John; I live in the Bay area named for Jesus’ friend Francis; I was born 1,957 years after Jesus. How could orientation depend so heavily on one life?

Jesus is history’s most familiar figure. His impact on the world is immense and non-accidental.

No one knows what Jesus looked like. We have no paintings or sculptures. We do not even have any physical descriptions. Yet Jesus and his followers became the most frequent subjects for art in the world. His image settled on in Byzantine art by around AD 400 is the most recognized in history.

He has been portrayed in movies by Frank Russell (1898), H. B. Warner, Jeffrey Hunter, Max von Sydow, Donald Sutherland, John Hurt, Willem Dafoe, Christian Bale, and Jim Caviezel as well as countless others. Songs about him have been sung by too many to count, from the first known song listed by the apostle Paul in the letter to the Philippians to an album (“Under the Mistletoe”) released last Christmas by Justin Bieber.

Even in the field of mental health, if patients have grandiose identity disorders, it is Jesus they imagine themselves to be. (Milton Rokeach’s *Three Christs of Ypsilanti* is a classic in its field.) Do grandiose Buddhists imagine themselves to be the Buddha?

It is in Jesus’ name that desperate people pray, grateful people worship, and angry people swear. From christenings to weddings to sickrooms to funerals, it is in Jesus’ name that people are hatched, matched, patched, and dispatched.

From the Dark Ages to postmodernity, he is the man who won’t go away.

But it’s not just that . . .



Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan wrote, “Regardless of what anyone may personally think or believe about him, Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in the history of Western Culture for almost twenty centuries. If it were possible, with some sort of super magnet, to pull up out of the history every scrap of metal bearing at least a trace of his name, how much would be left?”

We live in a world where Jesus’ impact is immense even if his name goes unmentioned. In some ways, our biggest challenge in gauging his influence is that we take for granted the ways in which our world has been shaped by him. G. K. Chesterton said that if you want to gauge the

impact of his life, “The next best thing to being really inside Christendom is to be really outside it.”

Children would be thought of differently because of Jesus. Historian O. M. Bakke wrote a study called *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity*, in which he noted that in the ancient world, children usually didn't get named until the eighth day or so. Up until then there was a chance that the infant would be killed or left to die of exposure—particularly if it was deformed or of the unpreferred gender. This custom changed because of a group of people who remembered that they were followers of a man who said, “Let the little children come to me.”

Jesus never married. But his treatment of women led to the formation of a community that was so congenial to women that they would join it in record numbers. In fact, the church was disparaged by its opponents for precisely that reason. Jesus' teachings about sexuality would lead to the dissolution of a sexual double standard that was actually encoded in Roman law.

Jesus never wrote a book. Yet his call to love God with all one's mind would lead to a community with such a reverence for learning that when the classical world was destroyed in what are sometimes called the Dark Ages, that little community would preserve what was left of its learning. In time, the movement he started would give rise to libraries and then guilds of learning. Eventually Oxford and Cambridge and Harvard and Yale and virtually the entire Western system of education and scholarship would arise because of his followers. The insistence on universal literacy would grow out of an understanding that this Jesus, who was himself a teacher who highly praised truth, told his followers to enable every person in the world to learn.

He never held an office or led an army. He said that his kingdom was “not from this world.” He was on the wrong side of the law at the beginning of his life and at its end. And yet the movement he started would eventually mean the end of emperor worship, be cited in documents like the Magna Carta, begin a tradition of common law and limited government, and undermine the power of the state rather than reinforce it as

We live in a world where Jesus' impact is immense even if his name goes unmentioned.

other religions in the empire had done. It is because of his movement that language such as “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights” entered history.

The Roman Empire into which Jesus was born could be splendid but also cruel, especially for the malformed and diseased and enslaved. This one teacher had said, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these . . . , you did for me.” An idea slowly emerged that the suffering of every single individual human being matters and that those who are able to help ought to do so. Hospitals and relief efforts of all kinds emerged from this movement; even today they often carry names that remind us of him and his teachings.

Humility, which was scorned in the ancient world, became enshrined in a cross and was eventually championed as a virtue.

Enemies, who were thought to be worthy of vengeance (“help your friends and punish your enemies”), came to be seen as worthy of love. Forgiveness moved from weakness to an act of moral beauty.

Even in death, Jesus’ influence is hard to escape. The practice of burial in graveyards or cemeteries was taken from his followers; *cemetery* itself comes from a Greek word meaning “sleeping place.” It expressed the hope of resurrection. If there is a tombstone, it will often have the date of birth and the date of death with a dash in between, the length of that human life measured by its distance from Jesus’ lifetime. In many cases, if a tombstone is unaffordable, a grave is marked with a cross, a reminder of Jesus’ death. To this day, if a cartoonist wants a shorthand way of referring to the afterlife, a simple sketch of Saint Peter in the clouds by a pearly gate will be understood. Whatever it did or did not do to his existence, death did not end Jesus’ influence. In many ways, it just started it.

He is the man who would not give up.

But it’s not just that.



Jesus is deeply mysterious, not only because he lived long ago in a world strange to us. Jesus is mysterious not just because of what we *don’t* know about him. He is mysterious because of what we *do* know about him.

As N. T. Wright observed, what we do know about him “is so unlike what we know about anybody else that we are forced to ask, as people evidently did at the time: who, then is this? Who does he think he is, and who is he in fact?” From the time on the cusp of manhood when he began discussing God, we are told that people were amazed and his own parents were astonished (Luke 2:47–48).

When he began to teach, people were sometimes delighted and sometimes infuriated but always astounded. Pilate couldn't understand him, Herod plied him with questions, and his own disciples were often as confused as anybody. As Wright said: “People who listened to him at the time said things

like, ‘We’ve never heard anyone talking like this’ and they didn’t just mean his tone of voice or his skillful public speaking. *Jesus puzzled people then, and he puzzles us still.*”

Jesus’ impact on history is a puzzle. When we turn to look at his short life, it has this same puzzling quality. No one knew quite what to make of him.

But it’s not a random, absurd, meaningless puzzle.

Understanding his life is like trying to wake up from a dream. It’s like listening to an answer which — when you get it — you’ll realize you always somehow knew. Like light on a strange path that, when you follow it, turns out to lead you home.

Jesus is as hard to nail down as Jell-O. Kings think that if they name his name, they can co-opt his authority. But Jesus the liberator keeps breaking through. When people claim his authority for slavery, a William Wilberforce or Jonathan Blanchard sees in him the call to freedom. He inspires Leo Tolstoy, who in turn inspires Mohandas Gandhi, who in turn inspires Martin Luther King Jr. He inspires Desmond Tutu to dream up and pray up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

The number of groups claiming to be “for” Jesus are inexhaustible; to name a few: Jews for Jesus, Muslims for Jesus, Ex-Masons for Jesus, Road Riders for Jesus, Cowboys for Jesus, Wrestlers for Jesus, Clowns for Jesus, Puppets for Jesus, even Atheists for Jesus.

Labor leader Eugene Debs claimed him as the friend of socialism:

Jesus is mysterious not just because of what we don't know about him, but because of what we do know about him.

“Jesus Christ belongs to the working class. I have always felt that he was my friend and comrade,” while Henry Ford said his capitalism was Christian idealism. The Quakers found in him the command for pacifism (“when Christ dis-armed Peter, he dis-armed us all”), while Constantine was converted by the promise of battlefield victory through the cross (“In this sign you will conquer”).

Look at the people Jesus brings together: Jesse Jackson and Jerry Falwell; Jim Wallis and Jim Dobson; Anne Lamott and Thomas Kincaide; Billy Graham and Billy Sunday and Bill Clinton and “Bill” Shakespeare; Bono and Bach and Bev Shea; Galileo and Isaac Newton and Johannes Kepler; Thomas Aquinas and Thomas à Kempis; T. S. Eliot and C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien; George Washington and Denzel Washington and George Washington Carver; Sojourner Truth and Robert E. Lee; Constantine and Charlemagne; Sarah Palin and Barack Obama; John Milton and Paul Bunyan and Mr. Rogers and Jimmy Carter and Peter the Great.

Something about Jesus keeps prodding people to do what they would rather not: Francis of Assisi gives up his possessions, Augustine gives up his mistress, John Newton gives up his slave trade, and Father Damien gives up his health.

A secular British curmudgeon named Malcolm Muggeridge was brought up short while visiting an Indian leprosarium run by the Missionaries of Charity. As he saw Mother Teresa in action, he realized with the force of sudden insight that humanists do not run leprosariums.

He is the man nobody knows.

But not just that.



The first person to write about him — who would become known as Paul — said that Jesus appeared to him unbidden and unwanted. And he had a strange way of continuing to show up where he was not always sought or even welcome.

Novelist Mary Karr was a lifelong agnostic, daughter of a mother who married seven times, set Mary’s toys on fire, and tried to stab her to death. Karr was the celebrated author of *The Liars’ Club* and a chronic alcoholic. Jesus was the last person in the world she was expecting. She

said: "If you'd told me a year before . . . that I'd wind up whispering my sins in the confessional or on my knees saying the rosary, I would've laughed myself cock-eyed. More likely pastime? Pole dancer. International spy. Drug Mule. Assassin."

Jesus was a teacher, but somehow not just a teacher. He was claiming to have announced something or discovered something or inaugurated something in a way teachers never did. As Pelikan said: "It is not merely in the name of a great teacher, not even the greatest teacher who ever lived, that Justinian built Hagia Sophia in Constantinople or Johan Sebastian Bach composed the Mass in B-Minor. There are no cathedrals in honor of Socrates."

How does Jesus survive his followers? The Inquisition and witch hunts and Crusades and defense of slavery and imperialism and resistance to science and wars of religion come and go and return. Judgmentalism and intolerance and bigotry infect continents and centuries, scandals of money and sex among church leaders never seem to cease, and Jesus' followers cause him far more trouble than his enemies. Maybe that's why he seems to move around a lot.

Andrew Walls noted that most religions remain centered in their original homes. But with the Jesus movement things are different. It began in Jerusalem, but was embraced by unwashed Gentiles with such zeal that it began to move across the ancient Mediterranean to North Africa and Alexandria and Rome. Then more barbarians took it to heart, and it began to expand to northern Europe and eventually to North America. In the past century, it has dramatically shifted again: the majority of Christians now live in the global South and the East. When asked why, Walls said that "there is a certain vulnerability, a fragility, at the heart of Christianity. You might say it is the vulnerability of the cross." Where the faith has too much money and too much power for too long it begins to spoil, and the center moves on.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said once that the name of Jesus was "not so much written as ploughed into the history of this world."

H. G. Wells marveled that after two millennia,

a historian like myself, who doesn't even call himself a Christian, finds the picture centering irresistibly around the life and character

of this most significant man. . . . The historian's test of an individual's greatness is "What did he leave to grow?" Did he start men to thinking along fresh lines with a vigor that persisted after him? By this test Jesus stands first.

Why?

Maybe because of its timing. Maybe Jesus was just a sympathetic figure who happened to come along when Roman infrastructure was good and Greek philosophy was undermining the gods, when paganism was dying and social systems were collapsing, when stability was down and anxiety was up and gullibility was strong and . . . it was just dumb luck. Maybe Jesus was a kind, simple, innocent soul with a good mom and a knack for catchy sayings who showed up in the right place at the right time. Jesus Gump. Maybe his place in history is a remarkable accident.

But maybe it isn't.