



CHAPTER 4

Plastic Jesus

Rocked by rivalry, my high school shouted the following cheer adapted from a 1940 song, “Plastic Jesus”.¹

*I don't care if it rains or freezes!
'Long as I've got my plastic Jesus!
Sittin' on the dashboard of my car!*

With adolescent self-esteem on the line, we converted a simple chorus into a boisterous cheer—to psyche ourselves up and psyche our opponents out. Striving for athletic mastery, we shouted with all our might to secure a wining reputation. This unconventional cheer ignited a rush of adrenaline, but it failed to enhance our performance. Despite shouts of unified hype, a plastic Jesus offered no effective advantage.

Artificial deities are no match for the real world. A plastic figurine made by a synthetic process does not supply the power we need or the courage we seek. We are weak human vessels, and a plastic religious model cannot make us strong. Fabricating a model of God’s presence promotes a false sense of security.

Motivated by a legitimate longing, we sometimes attempt to manufacture God’s presence. All too often however, we end up connecting with a plastic imposter. We know that religious models never satisfy our longing to connect authentically with Jesus. Nonetheless, our desire and at times, our urgent need compel us to keep trying.

Bringing God Closer

Throughout history, artists have used painting, sculpture, music, and drama to bring God closer. In the movie, “The Passion of the Christ”, director Mel Gibson engaged the senses of actors and viewers alike to facilitate an evocative connec-

¹ Credit for the 1940’s song, *Plastic Jesus* generally goes to George Cromarty and Ed Rush (developed further by Ernie Marrs).

tion with Jesus.² This movie allows viewers to witness in graphic detail, the pain and suffering that Christ endured for our sake.

Each week, ordained clergy don festive garments beneath lofty ceilings. They employ meaningful rituals, eloquent liturgies, and at times high-spirited hype to bring God closer. Since God inhabits everywhere, bringing Him closer means raising our awareness of His presence. Inspirational music sets the tone as stained-glass windows and symbolic architecture direct our attention heavenward. By stimulating our senses within embellished sanctuaries, audiovisual props help bring God into focus.

Jesus stressed the importance of maintaining certain rituals to sustain important memories. On a particular day, Passover, a few disciples prepared a suitable place where Jesus combined special words with a traditional activity. Saying, “*Do this*” He used sights and sounds, with flavors and aromas to establish a meaningful ritual, which we now call Holy Communion.³ Together with His disciples, Jesus concluded this sacred routine by singing a hymn.⁴

Holy sacraments such as the Lord’s Supper provide visible symbols to emphasize invisible realities. Bread and wine engage the senses with material substance to facilitate a divine encounter. Refreshing our memory through ritualized activities, e.g., “*do this in remembrance of me*”, provides a focal point in our connection process.

Rituals heighten our awareness to God’s presence since He currently remains invisible and inaudible. Sacraments help us connect with God partially by touching, tasting, seeing, hearing, and smelling—through the bread and wine in communion, the waters of baptism, anointing with oil, verbal confession of sins, marriage ceremonies, and funeral rites. Reading the Bible (or hearing it read) offers another sensory connecting point.

Sometimes with the aid of meaningful liturgies, we perceive God to be close enough to pacify our craving—at least temporarily. Usually however, God remains far too distant for our satisfaction. Artistic renditions may illustrate Jesus’ profile and religious sacraments may refresh our memory of Him, but they remain second-hand connecting points. Properly understood, they serve as a guide escorting us into a more direct connection with the presence of God.

² Newmarket Films, LLC, 2004

³ Luke 22:19 NAS and 1 Cor 11:24-25 NAS

⁴ Matthew 26:20 and Mark 14:26

Something within us longs for God’s actual presence. We yearn for a faith-assurance that transcends superficial religion, one that brings Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and our Heavenly Father closer—upfront and personal. God designed us to flourish in a personal relationship with Himself just as Adam and Eve experienced in Eden.

Contending for the Faith

Connecting with Jesus remains infinitely more important than a sporting event. God designed us for a connection that goes far beyond Sunday morning religion with our pastor/coach and fellow teammates. We are earnestly contending for the faith in order to connect permanently with Jesus.

In this contest, we compete against full time spiritual all stars. Seasoned sorcerers challenge our faith with professional propaganda. They oppose our efforts to help lost souls connect with Jesus for redemption and restoration. We compete against anti-Christ rivals in arenas of secular and religious animosity. Stiff competition comes from an openly hostile and increasingly divergent panel of worldviews.

Believing that Jesus Christ is the only way to win salvation attracts an assortment of derogatory labels. Cynics claim that an exclusive God breeds narrow-minded extremists and faith convictions breed religious bigots. Apparently, a Christ-centered belief system presents an intolerance-threat to anti-religious fanatics.

Deviant cults and deceptive mystics stage a continuous challenge as idealists proclaim delusions of utopia apart from Christ. Unfortunately, this contest for lost souls has escalated beyond saber rattling rhetoric to high stakes warfare. Name-calling is the least of our concerns. Followers of Christ face demonic resistance from supernatural adversaries.

Winning is Everything

Contending earnestly for the faith is not a spectator sport.⁵ Each person competes in an arena of beliefs that determine his or her destiny. Thundering cheers, religious hype, and pious traditions are no match for shrewd demonic rivals. Good losers do not exist in this “game”. They wind up separated from God. The final score determines an eternal outcome. In the end, only two sides exist: winners who enjoy eternal life with Christ and losers who suffer eternal damnation.

⁵ Jude 1:3

Contending with spiritual adversaries requires more than human ingenuity and natural instinct. Paul put it this way:

The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they pack divine power to demolish strongholds.

(2 Cor 10:4 NIV)

Ultimately, our victory depends on God's grace appropriated through faith in Jesus Christ.

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; (Eph 2:8 NAS)

Every human being faces spiritual battles with Satan, the dragon of demonic deception. In this fight, deceptive lies wage war against the knowledge of the truth. Nonetheless, we are more than conquerors when we embrace the truth about Christ Jesus. He offers an inseparable bond of faith and love. Paul wrote:

Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:37-39 NKJ)

Insufficient Models

In this verifiably hard conflict, we desperately need to connect with the truth—the truth about God and the truth about ourselves. Theories are inadequate because like plastic models, they lack viable substance. They may appear to be rational, but they do not dictate reality.

For example, theories of evolution fail to conform to reality. They employ controversial arguments unsubstantiated by scientific fact. Observable evidence based on the scientific method does not support their conclusions. Unverified theories cannot strip God of His creative genius. Fortified with an omniscient intellect and supernatural power, Almighty God designed and organized each feature in this universe. He imparts life to each organism because He alone holds the distinction of being the author of life. When scientific and pseudoscientific models try to explain the origin of species apart from God, they fall short with a big thud.

If we error in our understanding of both Creator and creation, let us err by giving God too much credit rather than too little. He deserves much more honor, respect, and praise than we give Him.

Victory over the harsh realities in this life takes more strength than a plastic model can offer. Decadent human behavior can be depressing and disheartening. We cannot afford to place our trust in a theoretical plastic Jesus while competing in a winner-take-all contest.

The Worst is yet to Come

The Bible predicts that conditions will grow more severe before Jesus returns for a glorious future. Natural and spiritual storms will generate tempestuous season changes. Some storms may turn out to be brutally insensitive to our well-being. When either physical or metaphorical storms erupt, a conceptual god confined to our own opinion will be too flimsy to sustain life.

By forging god-like models based on secondhand information, we jeopardize our eternal priority. A plastic Jesus designed by our own ingenuity and manufactured by our own ability offers a false sense of wellbeing. Even the most sophisticated substitutes cannot provide the spiritual reality that we need. Artificial gods cannot help us overcome the wickedness of Satan or the consequence of sin.

To survive the storms predicted in the Bible, we need more love and power than a plastic Jesus can deliver. We need to connect personally with Jesus Christ beyond superficial formalities.

Vintage Propaganda

The more preoccupied we are with alternative deities, the less likely we are to seek God and experience His authentic provision. Perhaps that is why Satan masquerades as an angel of light. He mollifies us with plastic tokens and counterfeit substitutes to distract us from the truth. In God's physical absence, Satan tempts us to reach out for inferior proxy connections. While God offers to meet all our needs, Satan attempts to redirect our attention away from His supply.

History records a litany of spiritual rifts and broken relationships. Selfish ambition has a way of intercepting the point in our life. Taken to an extreme, religious wars are responsible for horrid atrocities affecting millions of souls. Under the banner of the cross, malicious behavior has generated animosity against Christians and more importantly, it has generated widespread resentment against Jesus. Crusades and inquisitions malign the truth about God. They misrepresent His character, pervert His activity, and distort His promises. Somehow, the Church has confused her teammates and potential teammates, thinking they were mortal enemies.

No Substitute for a Firsthand Connection

Sometimes we strive in our own strength to win points with God and impress others. Instead of connecting with Jesus for an abundant life, we settle for saying and doing religion. There is a big difference between a heartfelt conversation with Jesus and the recitation of a formal liturgy. Both are important since they enhance our spiritual journey and complement each other. Prearranged words are well suited for guiding us to a firsthand connection. They direct our focus and reinforce our resolve but fail to offer the same degree of relational intimacy as a spontaneous dialogue.

Singing songs, reading prayers, hearing sermons, and performing rituals provide important connecting points. They enrich our perspective, awaken our heart, and inspire our performance. However, communicating directly with Jesus offers more than an echo of another person's thoughts. God made us to connect directly with Him in honest personal encounters. When Jesus ascended into heaven, He instituted a new season with open-access encounters. Surrogate deities cannot compete with the Holy Spirit when it comes to an interactive relationship. We have much more to experience as we connect with God in this season.

A Sensory Connection with Jesus

One day we will see Jesus for all He is worth. For the time being however, He conceals Himself—at least partially. While unsurpassed in effective influence, Jesus remains invisible and inaudible—most likely for our own good. Without apology, He deliberately hides Himself.

But He [God] said, "You [Moses] cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!" (Exo 33:20 NAS)

Without explanation, God stays behind the scenes, beneath the surface, and beyond our grasp. He knows that the longing of our heart craves more than a glimpse of His figure. Visual contact will not satisfy our longing for intimate fellowship. Connecting with divine reality requires more than eyeballs and eardrums. It requires an in-depth approach by faith from the inside out.

Seeing God is Not Our Greatest Need

God has much more to offer before we see His face and hear His voice. Deep down, we yearn for an enduring connection that extends beyond the tangible focus of this temporary world. We long to experience an all-inclusive, comprehensive relationship with God—no religious replicas, no bogus substitutes, no man-made imitations, and no artificial symbolism void of divine substance. We are

equipped to experience so much more than a surface relationship with atomic matter.

A Spiritual Connection—Based on Faith

Except on rare occasions, people do not see God or hear His voice. He waits beyond the scope of our natural senses. Supported by a universe of evidence, which points to His existence, God beckons us to experience His presence.

Theologians describe God as the ever-present One. That means He is always everywhere. Omnipresence provides a convenient advantage when it comes to divine access. It offers unlimited opportunities to encounter our creator, savior, and lover in ways that surpass audiovisual constraints.

Our longing for an authentic relationship goes much deeper than sights and sounds; it's not skin-deep. Connecting with infinite love fills our heart with inexpressible peace and joy. Believing without seeing fuels our faith with salvation.

*Though **you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*** (1 Peter 1:8-9 NIV)

Information will not satisfy our Desire

Our longing extends beyond intellectual reflections based on systematic religion. The accuracy of sound doctrine matters greatly. However, accurate doctrine cannot substitute for an ardent connection with God's passionate love. Contemplating God has great merit. However, contemplation alone is inadequate. Jesus did not sacrifice his life to connect us with a religion of thoughts. He did not die on the cross so our mind could ponder theological nuances. Jesus offers more than an opportunity to think about Him every now and then.

The connection that Jesus offers targets our heart as well as our mind. It saves our soul entirely. Information is important but even the best information will not satisfy our desire for propinquity (nearness and kinship) with God's love. Within our frail human heart resides an insatiable longing to experience a closer connection with His passionate love. We yearn for a permanent and more comprehensive sense of His presence—a relational presence that connects us beyond the limitations of our natural senses.

We long to connect with Jesus personally, as we appreciate the important theological distinctions that make Him God. Our families need to connect fully with the living God. Our cities need the transforming influence of His presence. The nations desperately need a spiritual breakthrough. NO! A plastic Jesus substitute

will not do. Our need is urgent. An irrepressible cry from our heart awakens us to plead, “Come closer Holy Spirit! Please, bring more of Jesus much closer!”

[Previous Chapter: When Answers are not Enough Breakthrough Connection](#)

[Next Chapter: Wilderness Substitutes](#)

[Home](#)

[Connecting with God](#)

[Connecting with Truth](#)

[An Audacious Future](#)