

Confrontational Secrets:

A Response to Jonathan Malesic's "Touchdown Jesus: On the Wages of Discipleship in America"

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Malesic makes a compelling case that "Christian identity [is] a form of currency in our political and economic marketplaces." Although I do not have much experience with football or football players, I am routinely appalled when the Lord of the universe is reduced to a bumper-sticker slogan, a merchant displays his favorite Bible verse in the front of his business in an effort to lure me in, or a politician assures me his "prayers are with" people in situations of need. I even wonder whether some trivializations of Christian faith might rise—or fall—to the level of wrongful use of the divine name and thus violate the third commandment. Malesic asks, "Has the constant cultivation and display of Christian identity in American public life actually done harm to the distinctiveness of that identity?" Perhaps it has. And I am fascinated by his invocation of Cyril of Jerusalem's "discipline of the secret" and his call for Christians to hide rather than traffic in their professions of faith.

I hear some echoes of such a call in the New Testament itself. Jesus' exhortations in Matthew, for example, to give alms, to pray, and to fast privately (Matt 6:3-6, 17-18) surround the Lord's Prayer (6:7-16), that most distinctive of Christian practices, which is to be offered "to your father who is in secret" (v.6, cf. v. 18). The same motivation seems to prompt Luke's Jesus to urge hospitality to those who are incapable of returning one's invitations (Luke 14:12-14). The evangelists' motivation, of course, is not to keep one's Christian faith hidden from one's neighbors, but rather to hide one's good works lest they be rewarded by human praise instead of divine approval. Cyril's "discipline of the secret" and Malesic's approval of a form of it for

twenty-first-century Christians in the United States have roots in scripture, even if they are a shade removed from it.

There are similar echoes in other religious traditions, although they too are prompted by different motivations. Josephus tells a story of the conversion of Izates of Adiabene by a certain Ananias who thinks the king might legitimately be considered a Jew should he worship the God of Israel without being circumcised, since that is thought to jeopardize him politically. Another missionary preacher, though, follows Ananias to Izates's court and persuades the king that God is instead serious about circumcision, regardless of the social or political costs of conversion (*Antiquities* XX, 34-48). Similarly, Islam has a principle of *taqiyya*, "the hiding of true beliefs, religiously sanctioned for Muslims, usually minority Shiites, under hostile rule."¹ Both these cases, though, concern the protection of religious people from belligerent neighbors rather than from trivialization of or wrongful profiting from their faith.

A good bit of the New Testament, on the other hand, is frankly suspicious of Christians who hide their identities. The Fourth Gospel, for example, makes merciless fun of Nicodemus for slinking around by night to satisfy his curiosity about Jesus (John 3:1-21; 19:39). John's Jesus hides himself briefly before the divinely-appointed hour of his glory arrives (7:1-13), but then at his trial tells the high priest, "I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret" (18:20). In Acts, Luke repeatedly portrays his heroes as not only speaking and acting publicly, but also making frank confession when called on the carpet by imperial or Jewish authorities (e.g., 4:19). And 1 Peter tells believers, "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you" (3:15).

¹ *The New York Times*, Oct 10, 2010, p. A29.

The New Testament writer who is most fascinated by secrecy, though, and about whom I thought most frequently while I reflected on Malesic's essay, is Mark. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus repeatedly forbids the people he heals or exorcises, the disciples, and the crowds to disclose what they have seen. From the very start, the evangelist says Jesus "cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him" (1:34; cf. 3:12). He tells a leper he heals, "See that you say nothing to anyone" (1:44). Although he gives "the secret of the kingdom" to his inner circle, he tells parables so that outsiders will not understand (4:11-12). He tells Jairus and his wife that no one should know about their daughter (5:43), despite the fact that her funeral has already started and presumably the neighbors will notice that the once-dead child has been raised. It is not that all these exhortations to secrecy are very effective. Mark makes explicit after Jesus heals a deaf and dumb man what the narrative has implied all along: "Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it" (7:36). When Peter finally seems to understand at Caesarea Philippi that Jesus is God's messiah, Jesus "sternly order[s] them not to tell anyone about him" (8:30), and after the transfiguration "he order[s] them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead" (9:9).

Jesus' secrecy in Mark is a great deal more confrontational than it is protective of the church's integrity, I think. Since the turn of the last century, with William Wrede's landmark study of Mark,² readers have seen that the theme of secrecy that runs through Mark's book is literary rather than historical. That is, it is Mark rather than Jesus who enjoins silence about Jesus' identity; secrecy is a literary rather than an historical motif. It is designed to hide from

² *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien: Zugleich ein Beitrag zum Verständnis des Markusevangeliums*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1901); ET *The Messianic Secret*, trans. J. C. G. Grieg (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1971).

Jesus' enemies the fact that he is God's messiah (1:1), God's son (1:11), "the holy one of God" (1:24), the Son of Man who has God's authority to forgive sin (1:2:7), the bridegroom whose coming portends God's redemption (2:19), and the strong man who binds Satan and steals back what Satan has taken from God (3:27). In Mark's story, the more Jesus' opponents misunderstand who he is, the more they oppose him, and the more they oppose him, the more they drive him to the cross, which is where the real revelation of Jesus' identity takes place. The only unsilenced confession of Jesus' identity in Mark is made by the centurion at the cross (15:39) because it is the only one that is finally true. Jesus is God's son, God's messiah, not because he is a great teacher or preacher or wonder-worker, but because he is the Crucified.³

"To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God," he says to his disciples, despite the fact that they remain frustratingly clueless throughout the narrative. "But for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that 'they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven'" (4:11-12). Rather than using parables to explain and make clear what he is doing, Mark's Jesus speaks in riddles until the time he begins to talk about his arrest, trial, execution, and resurrection. After the first of Jesus' three so-called passion predictions, Mark says, "he said all this quite openly" (8:32). As Jesus approaches his death, the time of secrecy turns to a season of openness. The secrecy in the first half of the book thus functions to drive the plot of Mark's story. "Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket," Jesus asks, "or under the bed, and not on the lampstand? For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light" (4:21-22). The hiding of Jesus in Mark functions ultimately to reveal him. He is

³ See Joel Marcus, *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God*, SBLDS 90 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986). See also Marcus's two-volume commentary, *Mark 1-8* and *Mark 8-16*; AB (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000, 2009).

revealed, though, not as the conquering warrior or hailed as the socially successful celebrity, but as the one who lays down his life as ransom for the world God loves.

The church has never handled success very well. We always seem to sacrifice the authenticity of our confession when we live too close to the sources of the world's power. Malesic's diagnosis of the current misuse of Christian identity in North American culture is testimony to that. The vitality of the church in parts of the world where it is not particularly welcome is further evidence. Justo González warns that a church that follows a crucified Lord probably ought to be uncomfortable with the kind of mainstream status ours now enjoys.⁴ Might we perhaps be on the verge of re-entering a world that hates us for Jesus' sake? Might we be approaching a time when, as truly marginal people, North American Christians live and speak from outside the spheres of cultural and political influence? Although the church might well heed Malesic's call to keep its identity secret rather than prostitute it for commercial or social gain, I pray the church is approaching a time when instead Mark's kind of secrecy is called for.

Questions to Consider:

1. How significant is it to you that different New Testament texts treat the importance of secrecy in different—and not especially reconcilable—ways?
2. How do you understand the difference between secrets that are meant to confront and those that are meant to protect? Can you think of examples (e.g., those in witness protection programs) where this is the case?

⁴ Justo L. González, *Santa Biblia: The Bible Through Hispanic Eyes* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

3. Why do you think Mark's Jesus reveals himself most clearly in the crucifixion? What are the implications of connecting revelation only to the crucifixion for Christians in the 21st Century west?