

The Natural Man's Struggle with Reformed Theology: Jesus vs. Me

By [Tom Elkin](#)

July 12, 2009

It seems like we have some lights on tonight that we haven't always had on. It's bright up here tonight! I want to start off tonight by saying thank you for the opportunity for letting me be with you. It's been a fun experience for me. I also want to say, before I spoke the first Wednesday night, Jeremy said something rather profound to me — you don't remember what it was, do you? He said, “If you can't preach at First Church on Wednesday nights, you can't preach anywhere.” And I think that's probably true. You folk have been most supportive, most encouraging, and I deeply appreciate that. You have prayed for me both in public and in private, and you have been very faithful in being here to listen to what this old man's got to say. I hope it has honored God. That has been our intention and purpose. I also hope it has stirred your thinking because I want you to think about your faith and what's taking place in the world about you. Now that's just an introduction for saying thank you for letting me do this — okay?

So, we've come now to the last session in our attempt to understand the natural man and his reaction to the reformed faith. That's what we've been trying to understand all along — what is the natural man's understanding of this thing that we hold so dear, that we believe — the reformed faith? Obviously, we haven't said everything that we could have, or perhaps that we should have, but the major purpose has been to stir the pot. In summary, today's natural man struggles with any absolutes, which in his opinion do not enhance his position. So the natural man struggles with anything, shall we say, that he perceives doesn't benefit him. The individual rights, the right not to be excluded, are considered sacred in today's world. God, Scripture, heaven, hell, are all matters of personal opinion to people in the world today. The particulars of the reformed faith have taken on an ominous or oppressive note or quality when viewed against sacred individual rights. And what we've tried to do here is point out some of those things and how the conflict comes about.

Now TULIP - we've talked about it. It used to be we fought about the adjective and now we consider the noun. Let's hold to our faith. It becomes theological jargon to so many people in the world today where sin is seen as relative or an unnecessary concept. I'm reminded again of Menninger's book, *Whatever Became of Sin?* People who are not avowed Christians even notice that the change has taken place. Depravity, election, atonement, grace, perseverance

are unrelated to the world of diversity, inclusion, and rights. We'll say a little bit more about the rebirth of the reformed faith or the new reformation as we go along here tonight.

However, one last comparison cries out in my mind to be made and that's what we're going to talk about here tonight: Jesus versus me. You'll understand why I used that title here in just a few minutes — “Jesus versus Me.” Most everyone would agree that we live in a “me, my, mine world.” That is the number one thought of most folk, especially in the western world or in the United States. We have to come to grips with that and live with this and some way, under God's direction, have a plan of action. Now tonight let's talk first about Jesus.

I want to first share something with you that I hope is not offensive. It was an article given to me by C. O. Turner, a good friend in Memphis, a very devout Christian man. It's from *Popular Mechanics* magazine. I know y'all read *Popular Mechanics* every week, but in case you don't, I'm going to read about this one, okay? The title of the article was “The Real Face of Jesus - What Did Jesus Look Like?” And this is a forensic anthropologist, who had at one time taught at the University of Manchester in England, and he has used his skills there, obviously in the courtroom, but he has also applied some of those forensic skills to some fairly prominent people of the past. For instance, he came up with what he thought Philip II, the father of Alexander the Great, looked like. He came up with what he thought King Midas of Pessinus looked like. Well, he also has found some preserved bodies, in what we would call the Holy Land, that date back to the time of Christ. And by forensic anthropology examination, he has come up with what Christ probably looked like. Now don't get offended, but let's just look at this. I'm telling you right now the reason why I'm doing this — it's amazing to me that Jesus is still that important in the world today. Isn't that amazing?

Well anyway, back to his little article that he wrote. He couldn't come up with what Jesus' hair or complexion looked like, but he comes up in other ways with that. One way is by looking at old paintings and drawings at the time and what the ethnic background would look like, and he came to the conclusion that Christ probably had darker skin than we think about and did not have blue eyes. And most of us have been in Sunday school classes where there is a picture of Christ somewhere and He's got hair down to His shoulders and He's looking up like this and He's got blue eyes and that sharp nose and He sort of looks like He came from Norway maybe. Well, he said, no probably not. He probably had a dark complexion and probably had dark eyes because ethnically that would be what a Jew of that day would look like.

Now, when it came to what His hair looked like, he turned to the Bible to find out. Now there was a fairly famous Pharisee who had an encounter with Jesus and it changed his life around, and at any rate he wrote a bunch of books. In one of them he says the following, 1 Corinthians 11:14-15: “Does not nature itself teach you, that if a man wears long hair, it is a disgrace for him, but if a woman has

long hair, it is her glory?" Now, let's just suppose Christ had shoulder length hair. Do you think Paul would say that? I don't. So his conclusion is he had shorter hair, but because everyone of His day had a beard, He probably had a beard. I don't know whether he's right or not. I just think it's fascinating that he's still consumed with the question of what Christ looked like!

By analyzing the skeletal remains dating back to the time of Christ, the skull in particular, he came up with the conclusion that Christ was probably 5 feet 1 inch tall. Now I know y'all think Christ was 6'2", eyes of blue and long hair, and flowed across the ground. I don't think so. The average soldier in the Revolutionary War was 5 foot 6. George Washington was tall, so was Abraham Lincoln, but most folk in the last couple of hundred years weren't that tall. 5 foot 1, beard, short hair — probably curly — dark complected, dark eyes — isn't that amazing? He also, since He was a carpenter and worked outdoors, He was probably fairly muscular. He worked until age 30 you know. He probably was rather weathered looking. His skin wasn't that nice, pale, "I spend my time inside all the time" look. But isn't it amazing that people are that consumed, even in today's world, with what Christ looked like? That's the reason for telling the story about his article. And I've got a composite picture that he came up with that I'm not going to show to you because then you will blow me out of here, but this doesn't look like my picture of Him either.

Now, what He looked like is not really the question. "Who was He?" is the question. Our Westminster Confession of Faith: "Of Christ the mediator, it pleased God, in His eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus, His only begotten Son, to be the Mediator between God and man, the Prophet, Priest, and King, the Head and Savior of His Church, the Heir of all things and Judge of the world, unto whom He did from all eternity give a people to be His seed, and to be, by Him, in time, redeemed, called, justified, sanctified, glorified." That's what we believe. I could read the rest of it — there's no real need to. We look at Jesus Christ as the Son of God, eternal part of the Trinity, a one substance with God, not different from, not made by, a part of, who became man, truly man — 100% man, 100% God. That's who we know Christ to be. That's important, because in today's world, the question is: Jesus or me? Which one is going to take precedent in my world and in my life? I could read a number of Scriptures. I'll just read one Old Testament one. Isaiah 42:1: "Behold my servant, whom I uphold, mine elect, and whom my soul delighteth. I have put My Spirit upon Him. He shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles." Just one — our Jesus, the historical Jesus, the Son of God, the Savior of the world. That's who we, as people of the reformed faith, believe Him to be and have confidence that He is. That's Jesus.

Now, the "me world." Last week I read something about a poll that had been done about how many people believe what, etc. And there was an interview in that poll of an Episcopalian named Gerald McDermott. I want to read a quote from him. When asked, "How is it that works are playing such a big deal in

Christian thinking today, why do so many Christian people believe that they sort of work their way to God?”, this is his quote: “This happened, this believing this way, because in the last thirty years, American pastors have lost their nerve to preach a theology that goes against the grain of American narcissism.” I happen to believe he's right on. I think he nailed it in one fail blow of the hammer. American narcissism and the failure of the church across the board, not individual churches but across the board, the Christian church, to proclaim - it goes against the grain of narcissism.

Now, what's narcissism? A lot of people use that term, I know you use it every day, a lot of people use that term, but this is Webster: it means “self love; excessive interest in one's own appearance, comfort, important, abilities.” Hmmm. Inordinate fascination with oneself; excessive self love; vanity - that's narcissism - the Greek god or goddess that sits and looks at himself or herself all the time and doesn't notice anyone else - narcissism. Baker's Encyclopedia of Psychology, there's an article by Berry in there. It says that actually, narcissism means many things. In common terminology, it refers to what has been called a “triad of vanity, exhibitionism, and arrogant ingratitude.” Whoa - triad of vanity, exhibitionism, and arrogant ingratitude.

You read *People* magazine much lately? Oh, I know y'all don't read *People* magazine and if you did you wouldn't raise your hand, but there's a magazine out there called *People* magazine. And by the way I was in it once upon a time! My name has been in *People* magazine! I had a client who was struck by lightning and survived and talked about her recovery and she mentioned my — 15 seconds of fame was having my name mentioned in *People* magazine! In today's world, if you read *People* magazine you get a rough idea of what's going on. Forgive me for saying this, because my wife brings it home every time it comes out — we also have these social magazines and everybody wants to have their picture in them and I'll bet you most of you in here have, at one time or another.

There's nothing wrong with such magazines in and of themselves, but notice how we put that focus on everything. It's how pretty we are, how good we are, how vain exhibitionism, arrogant ingratitude. In general, narcissism refers to self preoccupation, while narcissistic personalities, we won't go and talk about all of it, as a cultural phenomenon, so Berry says, it describes our age as one in which is intensely individualistic, self-centered, and hedonistically devoted to the quest of a peak experience. No one wants to be average in anything. No one wants to be average. I want the peak experience of everything I can have. That's what he's talking about in terms of the culture of today. So, intensely individualistic, self-centered, hedonistically — I want my pleasure, but I want it to be the peak experience. Forgive me for saying this — why do people walk out of a marriage that's good, solid, and stable? Because I don't get the pleasure I want to have. Is that not narcissism by that definition? Why do I not try to work it out? After 46 years I'm not about to break in a new one. That's a whole other question, okay? But what I'm trying to say is, in today's world, so Berry says, we want the peak

experience, I want the fastest car, I want the most meaningful vacation, I want the, I want the, I want the.

By the way, he makes the most interesting comment here. Around 1900 was a phenomenon that took place in Europe. I'm sure you haven't read about this because it's not the kind of thing that most people read about, but hysteria was the dominant psychiatric problem in Europe around 1900. Hysteria — people would have this reaction to things, people would have all sorts of weird things, people would say Vitus Dance — weird stuff was happening. It was sort of the common denominator of psychiatric problems in Europe. It turns out now he is saying narcissism seems to be the illness serving this function at the end of the 20th century. I don't know whether he's right or not, but I'll tell you, he's making a good case for it.

Now, narcissism again. I've got to be real careful here because I don't think political statements should be made from the pulpit. I don't think that's appropriate, but I am going to encourage you to use what I'm about to read to you to filter what you see and hear going on around you. There's nothing wrong with saying that - Because narcissists and anti-social personalities are preoccupied with matters of personal adequacy, power, and prestige, status and superiority must always be in their favor. They fear the loss of self determination. They proudly display their achievements and they strive to enhance themselves to be stronger, more powerful, more wealthy than anyone else. In some, it is what they think of themselves, not what others say or can provide for them, that serves as the touchstone of their security and contentment. They really do feel a sense of entitlement to say and do whatever they want and if you disagree with them, you're a bad person. Disagreement is not tolerated. We don't have intellectual discussion if we have narcissists in charge of the discussion. We have either, you agree with me or you're wrong. A filter, please use a filter - narcissistic individuals are benignly arrogant, so Millen says in his book on disorders of personality. They exhibit a disdainful indifference to the standards of shared social behavior and fill themselves above the conventions of the cultural group. Exempt from the responsibilities that govern and give order and reciprocity to societal living. In short, narcissists possess illusions to an inherent superior self-worth, and move through life with the belief that it is their inalienable right to receive special consideration. Or to put it differently, there is no accountability, no accountability at all. This led Finshell, writing in 1945 to say that, to coin this term, he called it the "Don Juan personality." Later, 1966, Tartakoff wrote and called it, "The Nobel Prize complex." I should receive the Nobel Prize for all that I do. Don't you understand what I am doing for you? This is narcissism and it is prevalent in our society today.

Now I've got to read something that I don't want to read but I'm going to do it anyway. Millen, the guy who wrote this book on personality, says the formulation, or how it happens, the narcissistic personality, he says, "is relatively straightforward, tracing the origin of the narcissistic style" and this is the part I

don't want to read, "to the unrealistic, over evaluation by parents of their child's worth that is creating an enhanced self image that cannot be sustained in the outer world." I tell my child they are so wonderful, so great, so special, so, so everything, and when they walk out the front door of the house, the world slaps them in the face. And when the world slaps them in the face, they don't know what to do with it. Unable to live up to their now internalized, parental illusions of self worth, narcissists will display a wide range of behaviors, one of which by the way is anger. They respond to frustration not with coping skills, but with anger. The anger may be turned inward; the anger may be turned outward.

Now, Martin writing in 1975 - and this to me is just really important, so please indulge me, okay? — contends that, in current society, the self replaces community, relations, neighbors and God. That's where the title of "Jesus or Me?" comes from. In a narcissistic environment, my needs, what I want, becomes the ultimate for everything I do. My definition of what is meaningful is what I do. Hmmm. It's amazing. The early formulation of these traits is developed by direct and indirect messages from parents, siblings, and significant others, and by experiences that mold beliefs about personal uniqueness and self importance. Narcissists regard themselves as special, exceptional, and justified in focusing exclusively on personal gratification. Hmmm — Jesus or me? The more narcissistic our society becomes, the more antagonistic we are to a view of Jesus as the Son of God, the Savior of the world — plainly stated. If that is sort of a characteristic of our society, narcissism or pronounced self love, will put a torpedo in what the natural man is trying to do as he struggles with the concept of God, as he struggles with the Gospel, as he hears what's being preached from the pulpit of a Gospel believing church, he struggles because he's being called upon to give up his sense of entitlement and is being called to give up what the whole world tells him is his rightful due.

The Gospel clangs, which is why by the way you don't talk people into being a Christian. Only God can change a heart and that's why we have a barrier here. Notice the use of the word in our society today. We have entitlement programs. Entitlement programs are programs that you should get, that belong to you, and they are ever expanding in our society today. Parents today have fewer children and we value our children greatly, but the question is: Do we foster a sense of entitlement on our children, and in so doing, do we even sow the seeds of narcissism? - which is why I continue to say, grace is appreciated only against the backdrop of law. Grace without law is cheap, law without grace is legalism, and this church believes that and preaches that and says it, but the world doesn't.

Do we realize, as Berry said, that our society is replacing God with my personal satisfaction? Now I know what you can say - "It's always been the case. There's nothing new about that." But I don't know that it has always been public policy in the past. I don't know that it has been accepted publically as the norm. Now, having said all that, what do we think about tomorrow? I sound so pessimistic,

don't I? Nope. I am not pessimistic one bit. In this country, we have a revivalism of reformed theology. We have people who want to know absolutes and concretes and so we have a surge, a groundswell, of people turning back to the reformation. I don't think it's going to be 80% of the population like it once was, but we have something going on here.

But beyond that, there was an article written and published in *Atlantic* magazine, *The Atlantic*, the title of which was "The New Christianity" by Philip Jenkins. Many of you have heard that name. I know most of the preachers here have, but you have heard of Philip Jenkins. He teaches at Penn State. He keys an authority on the church and the world and contemporary society and all this. This is a quote from his article: "Richard Sipe, a former monk who worked at Johns Hopkins University at a clinic there (a sexual disorders clinic by the way), over the years Sipe has spoken regularly of a 'new reformation.'" And then quoting him again, "We are at 1515 (the year 1515 he has written), between when Martin Luther went to Rome in 1510 and 1517 when he nailed his 95 thesis to the door of Wittenberg, that act can be reasonably seen as the starting point of the reformation. He says, today we are at that same kind of a point." By the way, this article was written in the year 2002, which I find overwhelmingly fascinating that we have had this rebirth of reformed faith. That dude was being semi-prophetic. Way to go. He was seeing that this was coming.

Now, Christianity as a whole is growing and mutating in the world today. It is alive, but the problem is (and I've got tons of quote in here, it's just all sorts of statistics and everything, but I have maybe, this is one...) — "where the Christians are facing a shrinking population in the liberal west and a growing majority of the traditional rest. Europe, the United States, a shrinking majority. The rest of the world is getting on board traditional Christianity." And he has numbers out the right and left. "In 1900, Africa had about 10 million Christians out of a population of 107, about 9%" he says. "Today, the Christian total stands at 360 million out of 784 million, or 46%." Who knows the depth of sincerity and the truth, but isn't that interesting that we have this explosion taking place? I am no where near discouraged because we have things happening in the United States and Europe too, but I think there's being purified, the liberal contingent, is being shaken to its roots by African Anglicans, by African Pentecostals, by African Presbyterians. There's also the question of what's going to happen with Islam. His article plainly states "Islam will not overtake Christianity." I don't know whether he's right or not, but isn't it amazing that in the midst of our narcissistic society, we have a rebirth of the reformed faith, that is, a rediscovery of the reformed faith, and in the rest of the world we have a turn — as he says in his article — to what would be called traditional Christianity, where you read the New Testament literally. They believe in casting out demons in Africa.

By the way, I have a personal belief about everything. I've got a theory about everything. I think God deals with His people in the way that is most effective to deal with them. In a cognitive, logical world, Satan attacks us cognitively/logically.

In an emotional world, Satan attacks you emotionally. God understands that and gives us logical reason when we are mainly logical people and emotional stuff when we need emotional stuff. God knows what He's doing. So, as we come to the conclusion of this little study, I simply want to say to you, I am overwhelmingly optimistic, not that numbers are going to be the big significant thing, but our sovereign God is in charge and is working in this world, in the old world, and in the new world. Please, let's keep our faith where it belongs, not how polished people look, or not in our society, but in our God. Our God, He rules in the United States, He rules in the Ukraine, He rules in the Congo, He rules in the Philippines. Do you realize there are more baptisms in the Catholic church in the Philippines each year than there are in Spain, Portugal, and Italy all at the same time? God is at work. I don't know what He's doing, but there are more baptisms. Isn't that interesting? Fascinating? So, we're going to have confidence, we're going to preach the Gospel as we understand it in Scripture, we're going to hold to the verbal, plenary inspiration of the Bible, we're going to understand that people do have psychological stuff going on. We're also going to understand that Christian people have psychological stuff going on too, by the way. But our confidence is not in the healthiness of the individual Christian — our confidence is in the sovereignty of our God. The modern man's going to struggle with that, bless his heart. We want to do everything we can to help him, but we don't want to back up on what we believe. That does not help him.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, in Your graciousness and goodness and wonder and mercy, You deal with us, You touch our hearts, and you lead us to love and serve You. You call out Your elect from every generation, from every people, from every race, from every tongue. You put Your Spirit in our hearts so that our heart becomes the temple in which the Spirit dwells. You lead us, You call us, You call our children to vocation, to marriage, to relationships. You call them to serve You in whatever they do. You're a God who is active and alive amongst Your people. We pray that in our hearts and in our minds, we will sense Your presence, that we will know Your power, that our confidence will not be in social security or in a president or in a congress, but our confidence will be in Your everlasting love and Your sovereign provision and in the plan that You have for Your people. Encourage us as a congregation, a part of the body. Let us have that sense of calling that we go forth to do Your work, day by day in this city, the nation, the world. And in all that we do, may we honor You and serve You. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

Let's stand.

Again, our benediction is from Jude: "Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of His glory, with great joy to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen."

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