

Precious Moments Christianity

I'm reading Robert Webber's *The Younger Evangelicals* these days and thinking about one of the characteristics of millennial kids when it comes to the arts. Someone has been quoted as saying that bad theology leads to bad art. It reminded me of a conversation I had with someone about what I call "Precious Moments Christianity" (Webber calls this mentality "Valentines for Jesus") and it occurs to me that this issue ties in with the subject of relationships and meaningful community.

I wonder if part of the "Valentines for Jesus" or "Precious Moments" kind of sentimental Christianity reflects a desire to artificially create community and relationships? Bad theology produces bad art. "Precious Moments" figurines are, in my opinion, bad art. Kind of a "Christian kitsch."

You know what "kitsch" is, don't you? Webster's defines it as "something that appeals to popular or lowbrow taste and is often of poor quality." Kitsch has also been called the "optimistic fantasy of pessimistic modernity." This latter description particularly intrigues me. One by-product of bad theology is the undeveloped and backward Christian who hasn't learned to cultivate genuine relationships or communicate genuine care and concern. Sadly, for too many Christians, and to the peril of their own growth in Christian character, it's too difficult to tell the difference.

J.M. Cameron, in a review of *The Historical Jesus* for the "New York Review of Books", writes about kitsch: "I think [it] presents us with a serious theological problem and stands, far beyond the formal bounds of theology, for something amiss in our culture, as, for example, when well-washed fat babies or puppy dogs presented on the cinema screen evoke disproportionate cries of delight. Kitsch is a form of lying, and religious kitsch lies about what is, for the believer, the deepest reality."

The ability to meaningfully communicate genuine care and concern – mature Christian love – is difficult for moderns. These are things that come with a deepening and ever maturing discipleship, aren't they? But we know that some folks never really grow very much spiritually beyond their conversion experience. So, this is doubly difficult for the modern, who already has a general problem with communicating deep feelings, much less any kind of symbolic language. The spiritual life is retarded, and so is the ability to relate and communicate, especially with a group. The Lord's Table can't be expressed in a "Precious Moments" figurine; maybe that's why the modern church avoided it.

When we can't achieve an authentic relationship with people – when we can't express genuine care and concern – we will try to artificially create it. Giving an ooey-goey "Valentine for Jesus" card to someone, or expressing the same, is sort of the Christian conversational equivalent to talking about the weather. If all you ever do is talk about the weather, you never have to talk about much of anything else.

Christian kitsch is about more than bad taste: I think it's a modern by-product of an inability to communicate some of the aspects of our faith that comes only as an outgrowth of genuine community. Modern churches are great at covered dish fellowships; they're not as good at genuine koinanea. In the modern world, we plowed broadly; now, it's high time to plow more deeply.

One of the things I've noticed about millennial kids is that they are keen detectors of things insincere, shallow, and tacky. Thank goodness. Know what else I've noticed about them? They can develop deep and lasting relationships and create authentic community.

By the way, the name of the "Precious Moments" figurine that was posted on the website page where you downloaded this article? "Behold the Lamb of God."

© 2003 Chris Alford