

## How Not to Make Up Your Mind

By David Feddes

A black businessman leaves his plush office. His work for the day is finished, and he's looking forward to supper with some friends. He drives his shiny new car to a favorite restaurant. There he has a delicious meal and a great time with his buddies. Finally it's time to go. He gets back in his car and heads down the street, still chuckling over a joke his friend told. Suddenly the light of a police car flashes behind him. He glances quickly at his speedometer to see if he's been going too fast. No, he's under the speed limit. He pulls over.

An officer strides up to the window, shines the light in his eyes, and starts asking questions. The businessman tries to answer calmly and politely, and he asks the officer if there's any problem. The policeman replies, "I'm the one asking the questions here." He seems rude and suspicious as he continues the questioning. Finally he says, "Okay, I guess you can go." It turns out he had absolutely no reason for asking all those questions, except that the car was new, the driver was black, and the officer was suspicious he was up to something bad.

That story repeats itself too often. Motorists who haven't violated any law get pulled over just because an officer jumps to conclusions based on the color of their skin.

Another word for jumping to conclusions is *prejudice*. Prejudice means *pre-judging* on the basis of preconceived notions without bothering to find out the real truth. You make up your mind about a person without getting to know the person. You make up your mind about an issue or a belief system without getting to know the relevant facts.

A friend of mine graduated from college. He took courses mostly in science and business, and he finished right at the top of his class. Shortly before he graduated, my friend had to write a major paper on his overall approach to his future career. He displayed his scientific and business knowledge well enough to win a top mark from the three professors who judged his paper, but he also discussed something else that the judges weren't expecting: he wrote about his Christian faith, and how the teachings of the Bible would affect his decisions and goals. Among other things, he emphasized his dependence on God, his commitment to honesty and hard work, and his desire to take good care of the environment since God created it.

Now, as I said, the overall quality of the paper was sufficient to get a top mark, but one of his judges commented, "It's too religious. Sounds like something from the 1800's." This professor was baffled. Here was one of his very best students, saying that God would play a major role in his work. How could someone so progressive and so up-to-date hold to such old-fashioned ideas? How could anyone who knows the methods and technology of the third millennium be religious like someone from the 1800's? Everybody knows we've progressed beyond all that, especially in public colleges and universities!

When you've got your own preconceptions and prejudices, it's hard to hear what someone else is saying, and it's even harder to make a fair judgment about it. Prejudice can make you narrow-minded and nasty. Prejudice can make a police officer consider someone a suspect just because of that person's skin color. Prejudice can make a secular professor scoff at his most intelligent student just because his faith influences his thinking and his goals. Prejudice can make an employer reject the most qualified job applicant simply because of her gender. Prejudice can make you despise someone you don't even know, simply because of what he looks like or where he comes from. It can make you reject important ideas without studying them, simply because they don't match the mental framework you've set up for yourself.

Prejudice—jumping to conclusions—is a major factor in why some people turn away from Jesus and ignore the teachings of the Bible for no good reason. They don't really know Jesus. They don't have a thorough knowledge of the Bible's message. But they know a smart professor who rejects Christianity, or they have friends who aren't much interested in religion, or they find that movies and TV and newspapers don't have much to say about Jesus, and so they don't even consider whether they need a relationship to Jesus. They jump to conclusions based on things that have nothing to do with who Jesus really is.

Such attitudes toward Jesus are nothing new. Already 2,000 years ago when Jesus lived and walked among us, he ran into a prejudice. His personality was compelling, his teaching was brilliant, his miracles were astonishing, and yet many people jumped to the wrong conclusions and rejected him. Some thought that if Jesus were for real, he'd be getting more positive publicity. Others questioned his educational background. Still others complained that he didn't live up to their regulations and expectations. Some sneered that he appealed to losers, not to the better classes of society, and what's more, they didn't like where he came from. They couldn't imagine anybody worthwhile coming from such a low-down place. These reactions to Jesus can all be found in the space of just one chapter of the Bible, John 7. John 7 is a portrait of prejudice, of jumping to conclusions. It's a story of how *not* to make up your mind.

### **Publicity**

One form of jumping to conclusions is to focus on the amount of publicity Jesus is getting. If you don't hear much about him on the street or in the media, you may think he's not worth your attention. He's not relevant or important unless he can make a big splash. That's how Jesus' own brothers felt.

The Bible says in John 7 that Jesus was staying up north in the remote district of Galilee and steering clear of Jerusalem and the district of Judea because people there were already plotting to kill him.

But when the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles was near, Jesus' brothers said to him, "You ought to leave here and go to Judea, so that your disciples may see the miracles you do. No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since you are doing these things, show yourself to the world." For even his own brothers did not believe in him.

(John 7:2-5)

They figured that if Jesus were really the Messiah, he'd act the way a public figure should. He wouldn't stay out in the sticks. He'd mingle with the shakers and the movers and get nation-wide publicity. And the place for that was Jerusalem, not Galilee.

But Jesus knew better. He knew the movers and shakers wouldn't acclaim their Messiah and welcome him; they'd kill him. Jesus was willing to die, but only when the time was right. "Therefore Jesus told them, 'The right time for me has not yet come; for you any time is right. The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify that it is evil'" (v. 6). Jesus' brothers had the notion that anything good attracts positive publicity, but Jesus knew that true goodness is often ignored or else greeted with hostility, especially when goodness exposes evil for what it is.

If you make up your mind about what's important based only on what gets publicity in our great cities and major institutions, you probably won't think much of Jesus. You won't hear much about him in the classrooms of public schools and universities. You'll seldom see people praying to him on TV programs and movies, not even when they're facing illness or death. The news media will overload you with politics and sports and business, but you won't find much

about religion. And if you do hear something, it's often negative. Oh, it's not so bad to believe in a higher power, but people who take Jesus seriously and stand up for what the Bible teaches are often derided as "fanatics" and "fundamentalists." So if you go by publicity, you might think Christianity is at best insignificant and at worst harmful. But it's foolish to jump to conclusions based on publicity. Only after Jesus' brothers stopped caring whether Jesus made it big in Jerusalem did they finally see him for who he really was.

### **Others' Opinions**

Another way of jumping to conclusions is by taking a reading of what ordinary people happen to think of him. John 7 says,

After his brothers had left for the Feast, Jesus went also, not publicly, but in secret...

Among the crowds there was widespread whispering about him. Some said, "He is a good man."

Others replied, "No, he deceives the people."

If you want to make up your mind based on the opinions of others, you'll only become confused. Whom should you believe? Some people thought Jesus was a good man; others thought he was a liar. And even among those who considered him a good man, many didn't recognize him as the Son of God, the Messiah.

You can't go by the opinions of the people you know. You'll find they have many different opinions, and what's more, they don't always say what they're really thinking. John 7:13 points out that "no one would say anything publicly" about Jesus because they were afraid of how the people in power might react. Even where people don't fear official persecution, they're often reluctant to express their deepest convictions openly. They'd rather play it safe. Even those who have some sort of belief in Jesus may prefer not to talk about it. So don't jump to conclusions about Jesus based on what people happen to be saying.

### **Academic Credentials**

Still another way of jumping to conclusions is to focus on degrees and diplomas and academic credentials. As the story of John 7 unfolds, we find that eventually Jesus went up to the temple courts and began to teach. "The Jews were amazed," says the Bible, "and asked, 'How did this man get such learning without having studied?'" (v. 15). They couldn't believe that someone who hadn't gone through their education system could know so much about matters of supreme importance.

Isn't that just like us? We're often more interested in a person's academic credentials than in whether he's got anything worthwhile to say. We're impressed by experts, people who have degrees from prestigious universities. We'll swallow almost anything, provided it comes from a Ph.D. and is backed by a flurry of footnotes and so-called research studies.

Jesus didn't have the formal academic credentials that would impress the intellectuals, but his insight surpassed all the experts put together. They couldn't help wondering, "How did this man get such learning without having studied?"

Jesus answered, "My teaching is not my own. It comes from him who sent me. If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.

Jesus emphasized that his teaching came from God himself. And he went a step further. He said that the key to finding out whether his teaching is true is choosing to do God's will. In the search

for divine truth, obedience is more important than scholarship. If you don't love God and delight in him and strive to obey him, then all the education in the world won't help you understand the truth. In fact, you'll probably use your expertise to promote your own fantasy as truth.

Take Margaret Mead, the renowned anthropologist. She became famous for her studies of sexual behavior in Samoa. She claimed that Samoans enjoyed free, promiscuous sex without any guilt in a society that was almost paradise. Mead's research helped give scientific respectability to the sexual revolution of the 1960's. Later researchers, however, found that Samoan life wasn't nearly so problem-free as Mead had claimed. Why was Mead's research so positive? Well, as it turns out, Margaret Mead herself was promiscuous and bisexual. In Samoa she saw what she wanted to see, and the people who embraced her research heard what they wanted to hear. First they decided to ignore God's will, and then they embraced pseudo-research that supported them.

Some religious authorities do something similar. They changed their theology and moral teaching to match the lowest common denominator of their people. If their people don't seek forgiveness through the blood of Christ or trust him as their only hope of salvation, these churches suddenly "discover" that many roads lead to God, and that hell isn't real anyway. And if people no longer believe in marriage as the only right context for sex, the church appoints a study committee full of Ph.D's and experts who suddenly "discover" that anything goes as long as we're nice and caring about it. First come the sinful behavior, then some pseudo-scholarship to rationalize it.

Jesus said, "*If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own behalf.*" According to Jesus, your head follows your heart; your spiritual choices shape your intellectual ideas. If God and his will are your highest priority, then Jesus and his teaching will make sense to you. If you choose to do your own thing, your mind will constantly be working to "prove" that it doesn't make sense to follow Jesus or believe the Bible.

"*If anyone chooses to do God's will,*" said Jesus, "*he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own behalf.*" What you find out depends on what you've already chosen. Jesus is a Person, not just an academic problem. Christianity is a way of life, not just a theory. So if you rely on academics when your heart isn't right toward God, you are going to jump to the wrong conclusions. Your mind will just rationalize what your heart has already chosen.

## **Expectations**

Yet another mistake, according to John 7, is to judge Jesus by our own regulations and expectations. Some people were furious at Jesus for healing a lame man. Why? Because he had done it on the Sabbath. Imagine! Here was a lame man whom Jesus had healed completely—and rather than praising God, people were upset with the Son of God for doing miracles that didn't fit their schedule. Jesus' miracles were some of the most impressive demonstrations that he was indeed God among them, and the people used those very miracles as one more excuse to criticize him. Jesus responded by pointing out,

If a child can be circumcised on the Sabbath so that the law of Moses may not be broken, why are you angry with me for healing the whole man on the Sabbath? Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment.

It's easy, especially if you're hyper-religious, to get so hung up on expectations and regulations that you're no longer able to see when God is really at work. Don't make up your mind by

checking whether Christ matches your expectations. First see whether your expectations match Christ. “Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment.”

The problem of jumping to conclusions based on superficial expectations is especially striking in a discussion about where Jesus came from. Some people in the crowd expected that when the Christ, the Messiah, came, he’d appear almost out of nowhere. Therefore, they reasoned, Jesus couldn’t possibly be the Christ. They said, “We know where this man is from; when the Christ comes, no one will know where he is from” (v. 27).

Others had a different expectation. They knew the prophet Micah’s prediction that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem, and in their minds, this excluded Jesus, because they knew Jesus had been living in the town of Nazareth in Galilee, and they could hear that he spoke with a Galilean accent. They said, “How can the Christ come from Galilee? Does not the Scripture say that the Christ will come from David’s family and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived?”

So you had one group of people who believed the Messiah would have a secret origin, and you had others who expected him to come from Bethlehem. Both groups agreed on at least one thing: the Messiah wouldn’t come from Galilee. Galilee was considered the armpit of Israel, a place to avoid, a district where nothing important or worthwhile ever happened. The religious leaders sneered, “Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee” (John 7:52).

They were so sure of themselves that they overlooked a part of Scripture that did indeed predict great things for Galilee. Centuries earlier the prophet Isaiah had written:

In the future [God] will honor Galilee... The people walking in darkness have seen a great light... For to us a child is born... And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:1-6)

The prophecy about Galilee was right there, but the religious leaders were so hung up on their own ideas that they overlooked any Scripture that didn’t fit their ideas. They couldn’t make room in their expectations for a prophet from Galilee.

Ironically, the people who said no one would know where the Messiah would come from and those who said he would come from Bethlehem were both right. But they went wrong when they assumed they knew the whole picture and decided that because Jesus was from Galilee, he couldn’t qualify as Messiah. The fact of the matter was that Jesus was from Galilee *and* from Bethlehem *and* from a place they didn’t know. Originally Jesus came from heaven, a place no one on earth knows firsthand. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, when his mother Mary and Joseph were in town to enroll for a Roman census (Luke 2). Later the family returned to their home in Galilee (Matthew 2), where Jesus grew up and began his ministry. So the whole matter of where Jesus came from, which supposedly proved he couldn’t be the Messiah, was actually strong evidence that he was the Messiah. What other person fulfilled prophecies that seemed to contradict each other?

When you start making decisions based on your own limited knowledge of the Bible, or when you don’t see how Bible passages that sound contradictory can possibly fit together, or when you can’t see how it all applies to Jesus, does that mean Jesus isn’t God’s Son or that the Bible isn’t reliable? No, it just means that you still don’t see the whole picture.

Have you ever tried putting a jigsaw puzzle together? If you only look at various pieces scattered around, it’s hard to make sense of them. But if the puzzle pieces come in a box with a picture of what the finished puzzle ought to look like, you start to see where in the picture certain

pieces belong, and it's easier to put the puzzle together. In the same way, it may not be easy to take various pieces of prophecy in the Old Testament and put together a picture of what the Messiah is supposed to be like. But once you see Jesus as the Messiah, you discover how the pieces of Old Testament prophecy all fit together in him.

### **Status**

John 7 shows many people jumping to the wrong conclusions about Jesus, but it also tells of some who found Jesus convincing. Many of the common people put their faith in Jesus. They said, "When the Christ comes, will he do more miraculous signs than this man?" (v. 31)

When the religious leaders heard people whispering such things, they sent some temple guards to arrest Jesus. But instead of arresting him, the guards were gripped by his words and couldn't help listening. Later, when the authorities asked, "Why didn't you bring him in?" the guards declared, "No one ever spoke the way this man does" (John 7:45-46).

"You mean he has deceived you too?" the Pharisees retorted. "Has any of the rulers of the Pharisees believed in him? No! But this mob knows nothing of the law—there is a curse on them."

Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number asked, "Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?"

They replied, "Are you from Galilee too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee."

If you want to make up your mind about Jesus, you need to investigate what he did, and you need to study what he said. Those who really paid attention to what Jesus did couldn't help asking, "How could anybody possibly do greater miracles than this?" Those who paid attention to what Jesus said found themselves responding, "No one ever spoke this way before."

The members of the elite weren't convinced. They weren't interested in giving Jesus a fair hearing. They just said, "Look who believes in him and who doesn't. Decent, educated people don't believe him; only the stupid, good-for-nothing rabble believe. What else would you expect? Don't forget, the guy is from Galilee" (vv. 47-49).

Such thinking is still with us today. Some people figure biblical faith in Jesus isn't worth considering because it seems to be losing ground in developed Western nations, especially in intellectual circles. Okay, Christianity is growing in Africa and Asia and Latin America—but that's because people from those places are less educated and more superstitious. If you dismiss Christ in this way, you may think you're being smart and progressive. But that's not smart; it's snobbish. It's not progress; it's prejudice based on race and social status.

### **The Real Question**

The real question isn't whether faith in Jesus fits the latest trends among intellectuals in Europe and North America. The question isn't which part of the world seems most receptive to Christianity. The question is whether Jesus Christ is who he claims to be. To face that question honestly, you have to "stop judging by appearances and make a right judgment." You need to stop jumping to conclusions and consider what Jesus did and study what he said. Read the accounts of Jesus' life found in the Bible books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Read them again and again. Then make up your mind.

And remember, you'll find what you're looking for. If you're looking for excuses not to follow Jesus, you'll probably find some. But if you've chosen to do God's will, to accept what he reveals whether it fits your notions or not, you'll find that Jesus is exactly who he claims to be, and you'll follow him wherever he leads. Once your heart is seeking God, your mind becomes open to the truth about Jesus. As Jesus said, "If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God."

In John 7, Jesus gave an invitation that he still gives today: "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." That's how you make up your mind. You thirst for God, you come to Jesus without judging by appearances and prejudices, and by God's grace you find the living water of the Holy Spirit of God welling up inside you.