

Guest Editorial: Keeping Jesus Right-Side Up

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A few days ago, an unexpected wave of emotion swept over me as I was preparing to leave the pastor's study of First Baptist Church for the final time as the senior pastor. With an open Bible, an inquiring mind, and a listening ear, I have spent countless hours in this room over the past 12 years. This room has served well as a place reflection at times and a place of refuge at others, It is a place where I have offered fervent prayers and a place where I have heard gut-wrenching confessions. It is a place where I have shared generous encouragement and a place where I have uttered occasional rebuke.

Barry Howard This is the same study where I have prepared sermons, offered counsel, planned memorial services, prepared for baby dedications, brain-stormed with key leaders, and conferred with my trusted colleagues. This is the same study where I have laughed at times and cried at times. These walls framed treasure memories and have witnessed countless secrets.

With the last of my personal belongings in hand, when I reached the door, I looked back to make sure I had not left anything behind. While scanning the room, I saw it. "JESUS" was upside down. So, my last act upon departing the pastor's study on Friday was to turn "JESUS" right side up again.

Among the many plaques, trinkets, and gifts given to me across the past 12 years is a sign made of two colors of wood that highlight the name, "JESUS." Rather than being inscribed or engraved, "JESUS" is revealed by the strategic arrangement of the contrast in wood and color.

I'm not really sure how "JESUS" got turned upside down in the first place. A member of the housekeeping staff could have inadvertently flipped the sign while dusting. I could have overturned "JESUS" in my packing frenzy. Or one of the children visiting my study last week could have reversed the upright position of "JESUS" while playing with him.

My realignment of "JESUS" became rather parabolic for my final weekend. I realized again how easy it is, despite our best intentions, for the church to turn "JESUS" upside down, misrepresenting Jesus to our community.

We turn Jesus upside down when we minimize our faith as mere formulaic transaction. We turn Jesus upside down when we buy into consumerist Christianity. We turn Jesus upside down when we try to label Jesus as a Democrat or Republican. We turn Jesus upside down when we operate the church as a religious institution. We turn Jesus upside down when we exclude people who are unlike us. We turn Jesus upside down when we veer toward the extremes of legalism on the right or liberalism on the left.

We turn Jesus upside down when we contentiously frame worship as contemporary or traditional. We turn Jesus upside down when we take his words and teachings out of context to affirm our own presuppositions. We turn Jesus upside down when we preach partisan politics from the pulpit. We turn Jesus upside down when there is a huge disparity between our words and actions. We turn Jesus upside down when we confess his Lordship but we neglect worship. We turn Jesus upside down when we avoid addressing tough topics and tough issues allowing injustice and untruth to go unchallenged.

To maximize our impact and influence in the community, it is imperative for the church to keep "JESUS" right side up, from the pastor's study to the pew. We turn Jesus right side up when we faithfully share the love of God in word and deed. We illustrate Jesus right side up when we invest time and resources in "the least of these," the disadvantaged and underserved in our

city and around the world. We proclaim Jesus right side up when we “make more space for grace.” We exemplify Jesus right side up when we leverage our diversity within the body of Christ. We present Jesus right side up when we perceive other churches to be our colleagues, not our competitors. We portray Jesus right side up when we open the doors of our church more widely than ever before, recognizing that many disconnected individuals need to walk alongside us before determining to join us on this journey of faith. We embody Jesus right side up when we confront racism and courageously contend for the equality. We preach Jesus right side up when we refuse to give up on anyone, even those we perceive to be the most hopeless and hardcore of sinners.

And so, as I prepare to transition into a new season of ministry, my final action upon departing the pastor’s study is to turn “JESUS” right side up. And our challenge is to keep turning Jesus right side up in a world where far too often the message of Jesus is turned upside down.

Barry Howard was pastor of First Baptist Church in Pensacola, Fla., and is a leadership coach for the Center for Healthy Churches, where this article was originally published.