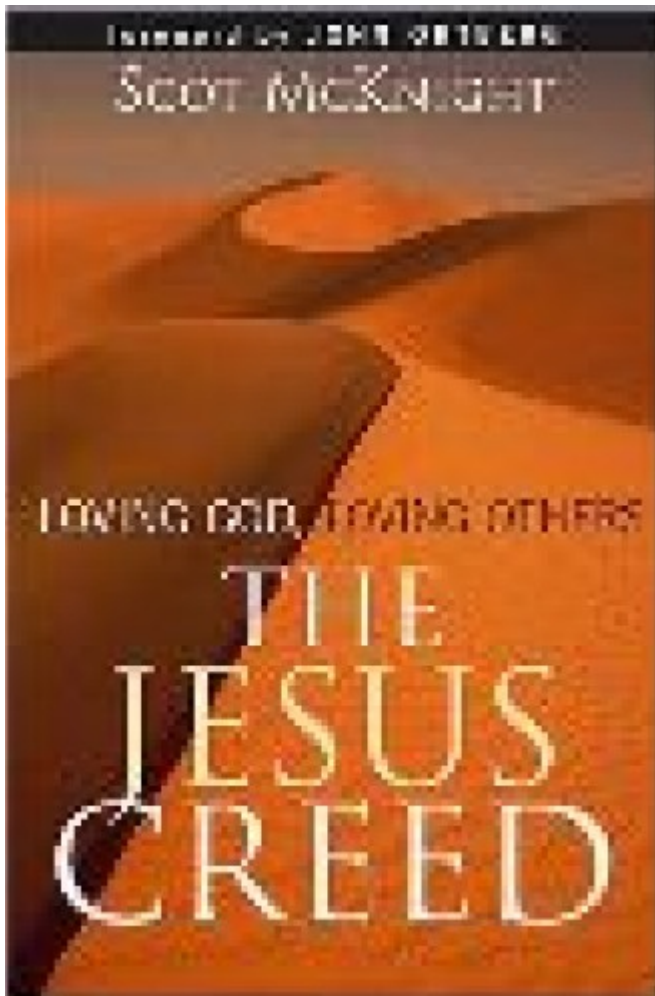


The Jesus Creed/Loving Jesus

reviewed by [James C. Howell](#) in the [August 23, 2005](#) issue

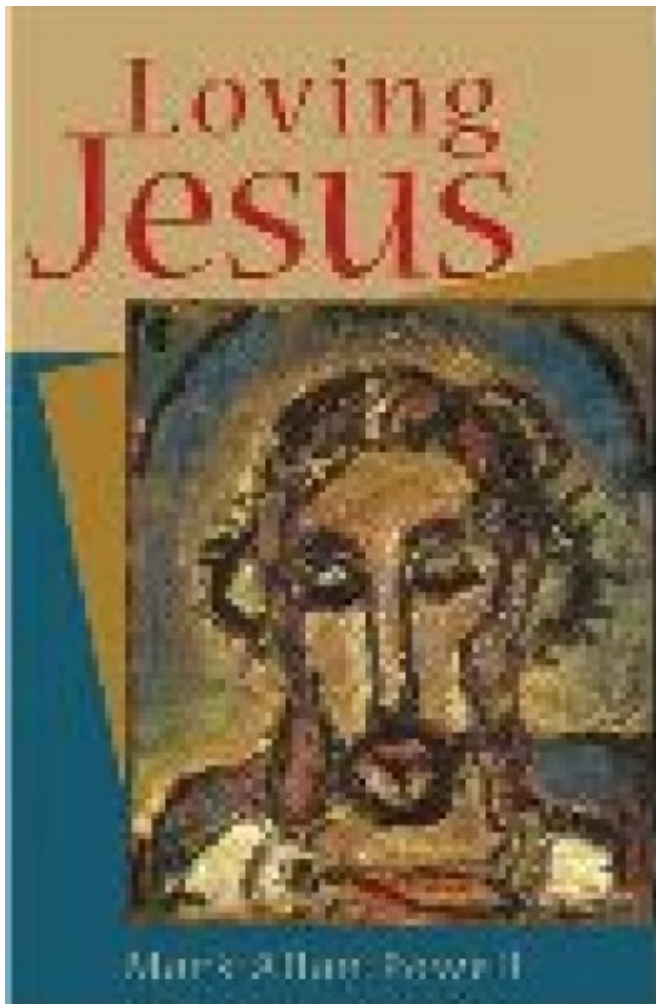
In Review



The Jesus Creed: Loving God, Loving Others

Scot McKnight

Paraclete



Loving Jesus

Mark Allan Powell
Fortress

Two bible scholars have weighed in with books that emphasize love as the heart of our life with God—a stirring reminder for those of us who function in brain mode and speak of the practices of spiritual formation so adamantly that it begins to feel like boot camp. Faith is personal, intense; our loves are reordered, our passions rekindled.

Scot McKnight contends that Jesus zeroes in on loving the Lord our God and loving our neighbors as ourselves as the vortex of spirituality. This “Jesus creed,” writes McKnight, “defines what spiritual formation is.” Mark Allan Powell reminds us that love for God isn’t just a feeling, it’s something we’re commanded to do. Still, he writes, “there is absolutely nothing wrong with feeling emotional about our

relationship with God—indeed, there is probably something wrong with never feeling that way.”

McKnight’s spin on his “Jesus creed” may be overhyped just a bit. The publicity attached to the book sounds as if a hidden scroll has been unearthed. McKnight claims that Jesus has “radically amended the *Shema*,” averring that it took “chutzpah” for Jesus to “add to” that historic statement of faith. But Jesus’ pairing of love of God and love of neighbor was not unheard of in Judaism.

McKnight’s usage of the word *creed* is also odd. For McKnight a creed is not something outside of ourselves, something we believe about God. He seems to assign the word a definition from the corporate world: my creed is my personal vision for my life. *The Jesus Creed* is very personal in its highly psychologized approach to scripture passages, which McKnight seems to believe exist for me and my spiritual growth. The Bible is like a nest in which eggs are incubating, and out will come little lessons we are to follow.

The book has many other shortcomings. Did Thomas à Kempis really say “Humongous doesn’t count with Jesus”? The illustrative anecdotes featured in each chapter are simplistic. As Vincent van Gogh grew older, he used more yellow, the emblem of hope. The lesson? “Each of us can begin to paint our lives with the fresh hope of a new beginning.” But didn’t the depressed Van Gogh later kill himself? Jesus says, “Love others.” McKnight’s illustration: years back, his family struggled financially until a member of their church gave them some cash to help. I’m glad those church members loved others, but doesn’t the illustration miss the scandalous point that the “others” Jesus had in mind were lepers and Samaritans?

I have always admired Robert Jenson’s felicitous observation that biblical scholarship “beneficently complicates our involvement with the Gospel texts.” McKnight’s book is utterly uncomplicated, and I believe we should expect something different from a critical scholar. And isn’t “love” also complicated, mysterious, paradoxical? McKnight says true things, but many books say true things and underrepresent the depth of the gospel.

Powell’s beneficently complicated book offers a critique of the kind of spiritual writing that satisfies only in the short term: “What these books do not do is help readers to ground their understanding of spirituality in anything external to themselves.” The historian can and should help to improve matters. Whereas

McKnight employs history in the form of illustrative tidbits, Powell uses it as a source for necessary correctives. "The historical record," he writes, "puts limits on my powers of fabrication." Powell does tuck in an occasional critique of scholarship: "I'm sorry to say that Bible scholars have also played a significant role in depriving everyday Christians of the heartfelt expectation of their Lord's return." It is possible to historicize the Bible and miss its personal dimensions, to leave scripture in the dustbin of the past.

Powell is far from icily analytical. He begins with a giddy narrative about his adolescent years as a "Jesus freak" that feels like an apology directed to the academy. He "fell in love with Jesus," and the luster has never dimmed.

His spirituality has deepened since those early years when he would pray for a parking place, as he has studied history, submitted to the church's liturgy, read "spiritual masters" and partaken of weekly communion. He challenges readers to make the same move from a "first naïveté" to a "second naïveté."

Powell invites us into a deeper relationship with God that moves from being "intensely personal" to becoming "profoundly corporate," from evidencing "human commitment" to expressing "divine grace," from seeming "clear and consistent" to appearing "ambiguous and contradictory," from evoking "heartfelt sincerity" to motivating "faithful duty," from producing "compulsive happiness" to evoking "confident sadness."

Powell reminds us that our relationship with God is personal but not private. I do not "invite Jesus into my life" (so that I then have "a tiny Jesus inside"!); Jesus invites me into his life. Whereas McKnight implies that God gives us grace so we can learn our lessons and do better, Powell declares, "You can be closer to God, but it has everything to do with Jesus and nothing to do with you. . . . The relationship is based entirely on his faithfulness to you and not at all on your faithfulness to him."