

IT'S THE MESSAGE THAT MATTERS

by

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The press loves controversy and everyone loves a mystery. The Shroud of Turin, believed by many to be the burial cloth wrapped about the crucified body of Jesus, offers both in high doses.

This year falls between two rare public exhibitions of the cloth. It was on exhibit for six weeks in the spring of 1998 and will be again in 2000 to celebrate the Christian Jubilee. The last time prior to that was in 1978. Perhaps its time to re-evaluate the nature of the controversy that surrounds this mysterious artifact.

Oddly enough, the controversy around the Shroud keeps many Christians from looking at it for what it is...a visual representation of Jesus Christ. In fact, it may be more controversial within the church than it is without. Protestants think it's too Catholic while the age-old Catholic interest in relics, perhaps for fear of ridicule, has greatly diminished.

Why is this so? Blame it on the Reformation...and I'm a Protestant. In October of 1517, when Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses against indulgences on the door of the castle church of Wittenberg, the Catholic preoccupation with relics was in high swing. Following the sack of Constantinople in 1204 during the Fourth Crusade, hundreds of genuine relics that had been collected over Christianity's first thousand years were stolen and brought back as bounty to find new homes in cathedrals throughout Western Europe.

Relics include far more than just items related to Christ, such as the cross, the crown of thorns, the whip, or even His sandals. Relics encompass all items associated with the Apostles, the early church martyrs and great believers who eventually were designated saints. And why not? Collecting things of value is a human pastime. Thousands of museums around the world are filled with things we as humans have collected to remember the past and to honor key historic figures. Why should it be any different with the Church?

Before 1204, Constantinople, the center of the Eastern Church, had vaults filled with such artifacts. It was considered a great source of wealth in the same way a rare art collection would be looked at today. Most were considered authentic.

Maybe it was jealousy or rivalry, but the great cathedrals of the west had none of these holy treasures, and they wanted them. Sadly, one of the darkest tragedies of Christianity became even darker with churches lined up to buy, steal or "invent" one of these holy relics for their own. They knew that laying claim to one would greatly enhance tourism,

which was a good source of the revenue needed to maintain these glorious monuments of faith. But it was faith turned foul.

A largely ignorant and illiterate populace quickly ascribed mystical and magical powers to these holy artifacts, which fueled the abuse and trickery of charlatans who capitalized on the superstition of the masses. Soon items ascribed to the saints were being sold in the marketplace to the gullible and the desperate.

It's no wonder that the reformers reacted to such abuse. And since few if any of the true relics could be distinguished from the bogus, there was a wholesale rejection of all of them. The idea of good luck associated with such items had replaced faith and the reformers rightfully rejected such heretical notions. They also reacted to the use and abuse of icons: painted or sculpted images of Jesus, Mary and the saints.

Consequently, Protestant churches today barely have anything more than a cross to represent their faith. Luther's reaction to abuse was correct and needed. Some would say that the Reformation was the best thing that ever happened to the Catholic Church because it did bring about necessary reforms. But the Protestants, led by John Calvin, may have gone too far in their bias against images. Within Protestantism, legitimate Christian art is a lost art. There is an irrational fear that images of any kind will end up being worshipped or that they will replace true faith.

Yet, Protestants flock to Europe by the thousands to behold the beauty and majesty of the great cathedrals...filled with magnificent mosaics, stained glass, sculptures and frescoes. Protestant churches today are starving for the beauty of Christian art.

Part of the Protestant fear of images stems from an incorrect interpretation of the Second Commandment to make no graven or carved images...of things on earth or what we think is in heaven...because God is a jealous God. But when Moses came down from the mountain and found that his brother Aaron had allowed the people to make a golden calf to worship, it should have been obvious what this commandment was referring to. It was idolatry, the worship of inanimate objects, or trying to represent artistically what no one has ever seen, such as an invisible God.

But all that changed with the coming of Jesus a thousand years after this commandment was given. Jesus was "*the image of the invisible God*". Suddenly God himself became an image; the image was that of a man. With thousands of eyewitnesses to the majesty of Christ, the beginning of Christian art can be found in the catacombs of Rome, painted on the walls by early saints who would become martyrs of the faith.

To visually represent that which we know is true is not idolatry. It is a visual expression of faith. The twelve Stations of the Cross, which grace the walls of every Catholic Church, simply tell the story of what Jesus suffered for us. The stained glass windows tell the story of faith in pictures. Only a handful of Protestant churches are adorned with the beauty of stained glass images. For the most part, Protestants seem comfortable with pictures only as long as they are in children's books. The Reformer's over-reaction to the

abuse of relics and icons has left us aesthetically impoverished and unnecessarily fearful of images.

Now we come to the Shroud of Turin, that 14-foot long linen cloth bearing the front and back images of a bearded, crucified man, including blood from the wounds. Is it a relic or a painted icon? Is the Shroud the same cloth known as the Mandylion that was stolen from Constantinople in 1204 along with all the other relics? Or is it a “cunningly crafted” medieval fraud? Many experts believe that the preponderance of evidence supports authenticity. But it could never be proven absolutely that the Shroud of Turin is in fact the Shroud that wrapped Jesus in the tomb. In that sense the Shroud can never replace faith.

Certainly every attempt should be made to determine if it is potentially authentic. But what if it isn't? The irony is that the message is the same. As a relic it is the only one that has certain testable qualities that could actually link it to Christ with reasonable probability. But if it is the work of an unknown medieval genius who figured out how to create this 3-D, negative image without artistic substances but used real blood to represent the wounds, then it was done to visually represent biblical truths. In other words,

It either is the actual shroud of Christ or it represents His shroud.

It either is an image resulting from the resurrection or it represents His resurrection.

It either is the blood of Christ on the cloth or it represents His blood.

Authentic or not, the message is the same: It is a visual representation of Jesus. IT'S THE MESSAGE THAT MATTERS.

What is the message? From the wonder of the incarnation to the agony of the crucifixion to the glory of the resurrection, it is the good news that God loves us enough to redeem us with His own life and blood.

That very blood, the heavenly currency that purchased the souls of men, might have stained a 14-foot linen cloth now kept in Turin, Italy. And the image that barely penetrates the surface of the cloth could have captured His victory over death through a glorious resurrection. Through science and the media the image speaks louder now than ever.

Don't let the fear of controversy keep you from investigating the Shroud. And don't be afraid to have others learn about it. Maybe it's authentic, maybe it's not. In the final analysis, it really doesn't matter. Ultimately, IT'S THE MESSAGE THAT MATTERS.

If Christian educators, Protestant and Catholic, can get beyond their bias and fears and focus on the message, the Shroud could be used in the way God may have intended, as a visual Gospel to a video and information age.

The Shroud of Turin Education Project (STEP) is committed to that mission. STEP features an award-winning web site, www.shroud2000.com. STEP also puts on an acclaimed presentation called THE MYSTERY OF THE SHROUD, A *Multi-Media Encounter*. Described as a “richly visual, big screen experience”, it has been seen by hundreds of audiences in both academic and church settings. For more information contact STEP through the web site or write to: STEP, P.O. Box 3397, Peachtree City, GA 30269. A voice mail can be left at 770-716-7114.

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