Do you know what I just discovered? I’ve made Jesus into a Presbyterian! Is that crazy or what? Don’t get me wrong…I think he should be.

In fact, for years I tried to force him into that mold—correct, nice, proper and, if he lived in the 21st century, an owner of blue chip stocks.

I always thought that Jesus would be comfortable in most Presbyterian churches and would subscribe to The Westminster Confession of Faith.

If Jesus’ incarnation had taken place in modern times, I was quite certain that he would be a Republican.

That was before the real Jesus showed up.

Perhaps the most salient fact about Jesus is that he surprises us. Well, “surprise” may not be the right word. He offends, amazes, shocks and, of course, confuses us.

And he refuses to fit into the mold we have designed for him.

If Jesus were just a man, that would not be such a big deal. There is nothing surprising about people who do weird things.

I can deal with a psychotic megalomaniac, or, perhaps, a neurotic religious nut.

But when Jesus offends, amazes, shocks and confuses me, that is another matter altogether because he isn’t just a man. He is God.

Beggars’ cups of blind men, crutches of cripples and caskets of the dead were thrown away because of him. Lew Wallace, the 19th century military leader and writer, said this:

After six years given to the impartial investigation of Christianity, as to its truth or falsity, I have come to the deliberate conclusion that Jesus Christ was the Messiah of the Jews, the Savior of the world and my personal Savior.

That’s so true. But an impartial investigation of Christianity isn’t enough, is it?

The relationship isn’t a relationship of the mind…but of the heart.

I’ve walked with Jesus for more than six years, and the more I hang out with him, the more I’ve learned that he isn’t what I always thought.

I, for instance, have had an increasing awareness that he doesn’t like religious people very much…and Presbyterians are quite religious.

Jesus was never angry at the prostitutes (Luke 7), the woman caught in adultery (John 8) or the woman who had been through a series of husbands (John 4). His harshest words were reserved for those who were very religious and who did everything right.

That can be disturbing to someone like me. I am, in fact, probably the most “religious” person you know. I teach religious stuff to religious students at a religious institution. I write religious books.

I teach religious seminars and I preach religious sermons.

I’m really religious, and I thought that Jesus would be pleased with that because...well, because he was religious, too.

Now, I’m not too sure.

In fact, not only have I come to see some things about him, I’ve come to see some things about me that are not altogether that flattering.

I’ve come to see the number of times that I’ve used religion as a substitute for God, a method whereby I could be self-righteous and display a badge of honor among the less religious.

Now all of that isn’t looking so good. So, I repent.

Richard Pratt, my colleague at the seminary, says, “Those who make their
living at religion will lose one or

the other.”
I don’t agree with that totally (I
need the job), but I know what
he’s saying.

Be careful about religion—it will
make you feel that you are close to
God, that you are pure and that
you are serving him when you’re
not.

For instance, Jesus refused to
choose sides, and I’m always
choosing sides.

A friend of mine told me years
ago, “Steve, I don’t know where
you will be in 20 years but, wher-
ever you are, you'll be waving a
flag for something.”

Jesus’ criticism of the Pharisees
was so harsh one can’t read it with-
out wincing. And yet, on more
than one occasion, he is at a din-
nery party with Pharisees.

What’s with that?

He reached out to the oppressed
and was on the side of the poor
and, at the same time, became
friends with the oppressor and the
ones that made the poor poorer.

I just can’t understand why he
loved Matthew, or why Jesus was
so close to the affluent.

He was clear about sexual moral-
ity. In the Sermon on the Mount,
he went further than the law in his
comments about lust being as bad
as the actual sin of adultery. His
teaching on divorce is quite cut
and dried.

In fact, he goes beyond Moses.
Okay. I can understand that…but
why in the world is he spending
time with adulterers and divorced
people?

He is living in the middle of an
occupied country, and yet he is
often seen reaching out to the oc-
cupiers. Man, that just doesn’t
make sense. I want to say, “Jesus,
just choose a side and stand with
your side.”

He says, “I don’t have a side.”
As you know, I’m quite political.
I have, on occasion, been called
opinionated...well...uh...maybe
more than occasionally.

The more I walk with Jesus, the
more I’m learning to see people
through his eyes. That means I’m
called to reach out to people who
aren’t the kind of people I want to
know...people who are on the
“other side.”

I like Republicans and Presbyteri-
ans, but I have the feeling that
Jesus wouldn’t spend as much time
with Republicans and Presbyteri-
ans as I do.

Jesus was not very proper. Pres-
byterians may be mean, sinful and
arrogant...but we are always proper.
As you look at the social events
Jesus attended, you begin to realize
that he is not necessarily someone
you would invite to your dinner
party. Talk about offensive...offen-
sive as in affirming a prostitute
who crashes the party, making
wine so a party wouldn't be
spoiled and pointing out the ego at
the head table.

Did you hear about the man
who, in a dream, was being given a
tour of the different levels of hell?
In the first level, things were horri-
able and he asked his tour guide
what they had done.

The guide said, “Those are Bap-
tists who danced.”

Then they went to the second
level and it was even worse. To his
query, the guide said, “These were
the Episcopalians who spent their
capital.”

When they got to the third level
it was getting a whole lot worse. The
man asked the tour director
what they had done. “They are
Pentecostals who refused to raise
their hands.”

Finally, they reached the deepest
level of hell. The people there were
in agony. “Good heavens,” the man
asked, “what did these people do?”

“They are Presbyterians, who
smiled, said ‘Praise the Lord!’ in a
formal worship service and used
the wrong fork at dinner.”

Okay, I repent.

You too...even if you aren’t a
Presbyterian.

He asked me to remind you to go
and do something that causes an
uptight Christian to doubt your
salvation. ☐

— Steve Brown

THE PLAIN TRUTH