*What Does God Look Like?*

Have you ever read the controversial novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*? If not, you have missed a historic persuasive piece that rocked America. Some denounce it as racist and denigrating to black people. Others feel it is too simplistic and stereotypical. Still others weep at its contents, stirred by various emotions (anger, compassion, disbelief). No matter how you interpret Harriet Beecher Stowe’s book, the fact is that it was revolutionary and did what few other writings could do … move a nation. There are other books that invoke similar responses, good or bad: Mein Campf (Hitler), Communist Manifesto (Marx), the Quran, and the Bible.

Beecher Stowe was a prolific writer, but she had two great handicaps: 1) she was female in a male dominated world, and 2) she wrote about slavery in a world that did not want to deal with it. She, like the slaves she depicted in graphic detail, had no rights and received no practical respect. It wasn’t that people were not incited by the lack of rights for women and blacks (slaves), but that people were not willing to take a stand and pay the price necessary to change the status quo. It’s too costly, it’s too bloody, and too inconvenient to evoke the needed protest. But there was a man who led the revolution that Beecher Stowe initiated in 1851 with her novel. Abraham Lincoln allegedly greeted Beecher Stowe with, “So you’re the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war.” (Civil War 1861-65)

For the record, Stowe’s book was used as kindling in Southern homes, but 300,000 copies left their indelible mark in the north, beginning the eradication of the Fugitive Slave act that prohibited harboring slaves. Great Britain sold more copies than the U.S. and thus shifted the previous growing advocacy of a confederacy despite strong economic ties to the land of cotton. Her heart-wrenching, blatant tale portrayed the horrific treatment of slaves by reputed moral people, but even worse is the ripping apart of the black family through commercial trade. Possibly Beecher Stowe’s personal loss of an infant produced an uncommon empathy for the slave mothers whose children were sold out from under them.

Uncle Tom’s Cabin was one of the most contested novels of its time. Initially, the novel was criticized by whites who thought Stowe’s portrayal of black characters was too positive, and, later, by black critics who believed these same characters were oversimplified and stereotypical. Uncle Tom’s Cabin also gave birth to the racial epithet “Uncle Tom,” which is still an insult today, describing a black person who is subservient to whites or is otherwise considered complicit with oppression by whites. Despite the criticisms and controversies surrounding the novel, Uncle Tom’s Cabin transcended its fictional genre, and brought the urgent issue of slavery’s brutality into the homes of white Americans. It galvanized many into becoming abolitionist sympathizers, if not activists themselves.

In summary, Uncle Tom was a black slave sold away from his family by a “trusted master”. Later, his new master was murdered one day prior to signing for Tom’s freedom. The master who purchased Tom was the epitome of evil and purposed to break him. He inflicted cruel, inhumane tortures and punishments, and eventually commanded others to beat Tom to death, leaving behind a wife and children.

Stowe’s book changed the conscience of the United States and Britain, strengthening the resolve to fight and pay the price for the victims of racial prejudice and immoral, deplorable behavior denying basic human rights. In a real sense, one man’s life affected millions. Yet, today, Uncle Tom is almost unknown or is despised as being a complacent push-over. But there was another underlying theme that readers miss and that people need to hear today …

**A Living Faith**

Harriet Beecher Stowe, a humble woman who wanted to change the world, portrayed Uncle Tom as a man who heard God’s calling, received God’s life within him, and lived according to God’s word. She pictured a true believer in Jesus Christ who maintained his integrity, some joy, and a strong faith in God while enduring the unspeakable, while suffering the unbearable, and while persevering against the vehement opposition of evil.

According to the outward situation, Tom was a despised slave given no human rights, afforded no human dignity, absent of any outward hope for a decent human future with family. Yet, his was an overcoming life evidenced by singing hymns, by working diligently and meticulously despite no reward, no outward recognition or appreciation. He faithfully carried out his responsibilities without murmuring or plotting to seek revenge or to destroy the insensitive, immoral, and hypocritical people who would have to give an account to God one day.

How could anyone live in such a way under such dire circumstances? This was a depiction of the life of Jesus Christ as revealed in Matthew 5:2-20. The kingdom of God is within any person who has received Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. It begins with being poor in spirit, open to God and His will and not holding onto or insisting on one’s own way. It continues with mourning the evil that seemingly is unquenchable, where hatred and lack of human decency is the order of the day. God’s kingdom yields a meekness that willingly endures impossible opposition, malicious slander and libel, and malevolent treatment by proactively hungering, even thirsting, for God’s righteousness when all around is unrighteous. In God’s kingdom, purity of heart is supreme, meaning there is a simple, sincere, and unmixed devotion to God. Hypocrisy is disdained and rejected, while mercy and compassion towards those who one day would face God and His justice and righteousness on the earth as in heaven is promoted. The kingdom of God is about righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit, meaning that this is not merely a human trait alone, it is God with us, attempting to live peaceably, right, and joyful no matter how others live and no matter how others behave.

The underlying theme of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is a belief that Jesus Christ was God come in the flesh, and that Christ died and resurrected from the dead to become Lord and Savior. Those who truly receive the life of Jesus into their spirit will experience Christ living inside of them and will display virtues of the One who endured unjust suffering and death without seeking vengeance, but Who committed his soul to God who judges righteously (1 Peter 2:21-24).

**Not Religion**

The virtues depicted in Stowe’s novel were not from an outward imitation of the gospel stories nor a naïve holding on to Christ’s ethical, moral, and philosophical teachings. No one can endure such hideous suffering through outward teachings especially without malicious intent towards the perpetrators. To receive and live by Christ’s life allows Christ’s living words to become powerful and pervasive. Believers are grateful, not discontent; merciful, not vengeful; powerful despite outward weakness and oppression; joyful, despite grievous pain; pure in the midst of apathy or misplaced passion; and prayerful especially towards others.

This is what God looks like. Do you see Him?

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