

## Jesus Without Formulas

Intro

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### Formulas

Our culture has a love affair with formulas and science. We probably wouldn't admit it, but most of us live by formulas.

Formula = a method of treating (or doing) something that relies on an established/uncontroversial approach

Formulas exist in every aspect of life:

Math = Equation  
Kitchen = Recipe  
Architecture = Blueprint  
Chemistry = The general make up of a compound  
Geometry = Proof

Church = Sermon (insert 3 points and a funny story)  
God's Will = X on a treasure map, blueprints for a house

We create these analogies to help us get a handle on a very abstract concept. The problem is that the metaphor has 2 really great points, but communicates half a dozen things that are not true. They're riddled with holes and leave us confused.

### Daniel Day-Lewis

Probably most famous for his role in *The Last of the Mohicans*, but most famous to the movie industry for his unique preparation for his roles.

Daniel Day-Lewis came out of retirement for a role in *Gangs of New York* as Bill The Butcher because he "was simply too complex and fascinating a role to pass up."

*"I am so loath to talk about the preparation," Day-Lewis explained. "It's my logic, it may not be (anyone else's), but the venture that we're involved with is a venture of insanity. We're trying to make a film. It's a kind of madness. We're all involved in the same thing. The work that I do to try and convince people that I am somebody else -- it's a strange thing to do, right? So, what possible preparation could be stranger than the thing itself?"*

*"I just go about things my dogged way," he remarked. "What you're looking for is always different and that primarily is something inside of yourself, that goes without saying. The details are neither here nor there. It really is always the same thing -- to create for yourself by whatever means the illusion that you're seeing and experiencing the word through a different sensibility and a different pair of eyes."*

In an interview with Daniel Day Lewis regarding his latest movie "The Ballad of Jack and Rose," he says:

*"The people who have turned acting into a formula are spilling all over themselves."*

*"The process is unscientific, but it nourishes you."*

I wrote about this recently in terms of the church:

*"We see this in churches all the time. Somebody does some cool stuff with incense, candles and coffee, so we go back and implement it... thinking the whole time that we'll see the same results. But it is so detached from who we are that people see it coming a mile away. Like a bad actor in a film. They see us spilling all over ourselves."*

*There's a part of us that wants to bypass Jesus and go straight to the methods, processes and formulas for great worship, relevant messages, engaging media (insert whatever you like). We want the franchise church. So we travel to Texas or California to see the latest church and how we can be more like them. We lose sight of the organic nature of the role we've been created to play. Churches are not meant to be the same. There is no formula."*

I would argue that we see this in our lives as well. Authors and pastors are selling more "how-to" books and methods than individually and a true unique, personal relationship with God. We want the 7 steps to the dream God has given you. The 40 days to a Purpose Driven Life. Your Best Life Now. The 7 Habits, the 12 Laws, the 80/20 Principle, Six Sigma. We want to insert our life into a mold. Cookie-cutter our prayer, Bible reading, church attendance. There is a huge part of us that just wants to bypass Jesus and straight to the methods. Just give me the secret formula and I will follow it.

We become bad actors in a film. There is nothing unique or organic about our relationship with God. We become replicas, clones. Jesus addresses this in Matthew 23:15 speaking to the Pharisees, "You go halfway around the world to make a convert, but once you get him you make him into a replica of yourselves, double-damned."

We were never created to be the same. There is no formula.

I believe that the principles that guide our lives are not formulas, but rather relationships. Relationship to God. Relationship to the people around us.

This makes a lot of sense, because when Jesus was walking around on earth He taught His disciples through experience, telling them stories, walking with them, then stuff would happen like a storm on the sea and He would reiterate the idea He had taught them the day before. Even then it took years before the disciples understood. So either God doesn't know about the formulas, or formulas aren't able to change a person's heart.

But formulas seem much better than God because they offer control; and God is like a person, and people are.... complicated.

Formulas remove the intimacy from the relationship. I don't have to go to God. I can open a book or call a friend.

Formulas take the mystery out of the relationship. It removes the discovery, the digging around and sifting and getting dirty and finally... "ah -ha! I found it!"

Like a miner extracting coal from deep within the earth. Instead of God teaching me something about mis-managing my finances, I want instant prosperity. I want the easy road.

Some say formulas are how we interact with God. That going through motions and jumping through hoops is how a person acts out his spirituality. This method of interaction, seems odd to me, because if I want to hang out with my friend Seth, I don't stomp my foot three times, turn around, and say his name over and over like a mantra, lighting candles and getting myself in a certain mood. I just pick up the phone call him. Formulas presuppose God is more a computer or a circus monkey than an intelligent Being.

It allows us to read the Bible very differently. I stopped looking for the formulas and tried to understand what God was really trying to say. When I did that, I realized the gospel of Jesus wasn't a bunch of hoops we needed to jump through to get saved, and it wasn't a series of lists we had to agree with either; it is an invitation.... an invitation to know God.

## Santa Claus

When I was a kid and, to be absolutely honest, a teenager and perhaps even in my twenties, I believed God was like Santa Claus. I realize grown people should not think God is like Santa Claus, but you wouldn't believe how perfectly convenient it is to subscribe to the idea. The benefits are astounding.

First: To interact with Santa Claus, I don't have to maintain any sort of intimate relationship. Santa simply slipped into the house, left presents, ate half a cookie, then hit the neighbors'. There is no getting us out of bed in the middle of the night to have sloppy conversations about why I am still wetting the bed.

Second: Santa theology is very black and white; you either make the list or you don't and if you don't, it's because you were bad, not because of societal pressures or biochemical distortions or your parents or cable television, but because you were bad. Plain and simple.

Third: Santa brings presents based on behavior. If you were good, you got a lot of bank. There is a very clear reward system based on the most basic desires of the human heart: Big Wheels, Hot Wheels, Legos. Everybody knows it is about the toys: cold, hard toys.

Fourth: Kids who were bad get presents anyway. Perfect.

The problem is that I believed in him. I believed he showed up at our house on Christmas, and it didn't matter that we didn't have a chimney because he could come in through the front door, which is what he preferred because, my mother told us, he had some lower back pain from always picking up after the ungrateful elves. I even saw an elf once. Christmas Eve in the middle of the night. He was sitting on top of my dresser watching my brother and I sleep while Santa was leaving the presents. I was so convinced. I told my family the next morning.

I remember the day I found out that Santa Claus wasn't real. It was terrible. My mother motioned for me to join her alone in our apartment's kitchen in Long Beach, California. I think she thought the elf thing was over the top. It was time to tell me. So she just flat out said it: Santa doesn't exist. I remember the shock. The time it took me to reorient myself. The questions that came racing through my head: Why did you tell us it was true? What about the keyboard we got for Christmas? You bought that? Where did you get all this money (it was obvious we didn't have a lot)? What about the guy I kept getting my picture taken with every year? What about the Easter bunny and those footprints in the house?

I was trying not to cry in front of my mother. Or act like it was no big deal. It was just a silly joke after all. She asked me not to tell my brother and sister. I went to my room to be alone and I cried. The loss of Santa was, at that time, the most dramatic loss of my young life.

After that it didn't take me long to get over it. I actually had a slight feeling of superiority over my brother and sister and by telling other kids at school. "You don't believe in Santa do you?"

It's all fine and somewhat silly when we're talking about Santa, but most people jump at the chance to subscribe to the idea that God is like Santa Claus.

First: To interact with God, you don't have to maintain any sort of intimate relationship. God simply slips into our lives, blesses us, eats half a cookie, then is gone.

Second: God is very black and white; you either make the list or you don't and if you don't, it's because you were bad, not because of societal pressures or biochemical distortions or your parents or cable television, but because you were bad. Plain and simple.

Third: God blesses our lives based on behavior. If you were good, you got a lot of bank. There is a very clear reward system. We look around at the successful and those with money and good families and nice house and determine that they must have a great relationship with God.

Fourth: Kids who are bad get blessed anyway. It's perfect.

## Language of Life

I wonder if the actual language of life is not the charts and formulas and stuff we map out on a graph to feel smart or right, but rather the hidden language explaining why every person does everything they do, the hidden language we are speaking that is really about negotiating our relationships.

That is the thing about life. You go waling along, thinking people are talking a language and exchanging ideas, but the whole time there is this deeper language people are really talking and that language has nothing to do with ethics, fashion, or politics, but what it really has to do with is feeling important and valuable. What if the economy we are really dealing with in life, what if the language we are really speaking in life, what if what we really want in life is relational? Relationships.

Now this changes things quite a bit, because if the gospel of Jesus is just some formula I obey in order to get taken off the naughty list and put on a nice list, then it doesn't meet the deep need of the human condition, it doesn't interact with the great desire of my soul, and it has nothing to do with the hidden language we all are speaking. But if it is more, if it is a story about humanity falling away from the Creator that named it, and an attempt to rescue humanity back to that Creator, and if it is more than a series of ideas, but rather speaks directly into this basic human need we are feeling, then the gospel of Jesus is the most relevant message in the history of mankind.

I wondered if when we take Christian theology out of the context of its narrative, when we ignore the poetry in which it is presented, when we turn it into formulas to help us achieve the American dream, we lose its meaning entirely. Perhaps if we stop reducing it to a list of formulas for personal growth, we can read it as stories of imperfect humans having a relationship with a perfect God and come to understand the obvious message He is communicating to mankind.

I wonder if becoming a Christian does not work more like falling in love than agreeing with a list of principles. I have this suspicion that if we are going to get to know God, it is going to be a little more like getting to know a person than practicing voodoo.

## Falling In Love

List the precepts/theology a person would need to understand in order to become a Christian. [have audience list things]

Could a person understand all these ideas and yet not be a Christian? Yes.

Then there is something missing.

There must be some idea we are leaving out, some full-proof thing a person needs for salvation.

Let's try this in a different direction: What are the steps and in what order are the the steps that a guy would need to follow in order to fall in love with a girl?

*"It isn't exactly a scientific process."*

Perhaps the reason Scripture includes so much poetry in and outside the narrative, so many parables and stories, so many visions and emotional letters, is because it is attempting to describe a relational break man tragically experienced with God and a disturbed relational history man has had since then and, furthermore, a relational dynamic man must embrace in order to have relational intimacy with God once again, thus healing himself of all the crap he gets into while looking for a relationship that makes him feel whole.

Maybe the gospel of Jesus, in other words, is all about our relationship with Jesus rather than about ideas.

Becoming a Christian might look more like falling in love than baking cookies.

I think it is more beautiful and more true to believe that when a person dies he will go and be with God because, on earth, he had come to know Him, that he had a relational encounter with God not unlike meeting a lover for the first time or having a father or taking a bride, or experience the birth of a child.

What I mean by this is I feel my life is a story, more than a list; I feel this blood pumping through my veins and these chemicals in my brain telling me I am hungry or lonely, sad or angry. I don't feel that a list could ever explain the complexity of all this beauty.

## Romeo & Juliet

Do you know where I found a very beautiful explanation of the Gospel? It's been right under our noses for hundred of years. Probably one of the most famous pieces of English literature.

Romeo & Juliet. The balcony scene is a great act that portrays the redemption of Christ.

At the beginning of the play, Romeo thinks he is in love with a girl named Rosaline, but he sees Juliet at a party and immediately falls in love with her, understanding his previous love for Rosaline as something formulaic and invented. Mercutio, in fact, would criticize Romeo's affection for Rosaline, saying "he loves by numbers."

Romeo meets Juliet at a party. A party he was not invited to but intended to crash. He cannot take his eyes off of Juliet. Shakespeare says that Juliet has "taken prisoner the wild motion of Romeo's eye."

Romeo leaves the party and returns to the house later that night and stands beneath Juliet's balcony quietly, careful not to disturb the Capulet house.

Here, in this infamous courtyard, Romeo speaks the lines:

*"But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?  
It is the east, and Juliet is the sun!  
Arise fair sun and kill the envious moon,  
Who is already sick and pale with grief,  
That thou her maid art far more fair than she,"*

In referring to Juliet as the sun, and comparing her brightness to that of the moon, Romeo is contrasting her beauty against Rosaline's, for whom, earlier in the play, he used lunar imagery.

This scene indicates Romeo's willingness to consider a lover who would disrupt his life.

Romeo's wish is granted. Juliet slips out the doors of her bedroom:

*"O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?  
Deny thy father, and refuse thy name;  
Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,  
And I'll no longer be a Capulet."*

Juliet is expressing her love, but also stating her understanding that the two shall never be one as long as he is called a Montague and she is called a Capulet. The two want to be together, but their names keep them apart, so Juliet asks Romeo to throw off his name so the two may unite.

The same proposition has been made by Christ:

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple." Luke 14.25-26

I used to read this and think of Jesus as difficult for saying it. But when I saw it in light of the balcony scene, the same ideas expressed in an effort for two people to unite, it became something different. I wanted it to be less strict. Less strict language might suggest a love less pure. True love must cost the participants everything. Scripture calls for a repentance and renouncing of our nature.

Again Juliet says,

*"Romeo, doff thy name,  
And for that name, which is no part of thee,  
Take all myself."*

Romeo will not gain love for love's sake, but rather Juliet herself. This idea is straight from the Bible. Christ's invitation is not blessing or money or heaven; it is Himself. This is oneness.

Romeo hears her words and responds:

*"I take thee at thy word.  
Call me but love, and I'll be new baptiz'd;  
Henceforth I never will be Romeo."*

There is no mistrust. Just complete faith. Anything less than this complete trust would not be true love. Christ asks us to follow him. A term that indicates a clinging to Him or imitation of Him. In short, He asks us to give up everything. Complete faith.

There is still trouble between Romeo and Juliet. Their love has been expressed and an agreement made. The two cannot become one because of the strife between their families. They are, for allegorical purposes, in a fallen world. Only in their death, can they be united.

*"If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection."* Romans 6.5

Shakespeare weaves the intricate complexities of the love relationship between God and the church into the context of narrative and creates a scene that would not be eclipsed by ten millions stories told since.