

“I’ve Got Issues: ‘I like Jesus, but not the church’”

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Matthew 16:13-18, Acts 2:1-17; 1 Cor. 12:12, 1 Peter 2:4-9

There is, of course, no end to the objections people will raise with regard to Christian faith. We’ve tried to respond to eleven of the most common objections so far – believe it or not. Hopefully these past few weeks I have stimulated your thinking about matters of faith and that you are better equipped to offer *“a reason for the hope that is within you”* - to use the Apostle Paul’s words.

Since the biblical number for completion or perfection is 12, and I have preached 11 sermons in the series, it is only appropriate that I should achieve perfection and throw one more sermon into the mix – picking up on an issue that is summarized in an oft-repeated line:

“I like Jesus, but not the church.”

Jesus is pretty popular in our culture today. He really is. (But then again, he always has been!) His face graces the covers of major magazines. He has been the subject of movies and plays and popular books and contemporary art. His face is tattooed on various parts of the human body. He makes television guest appearances on *The Simpsons*, *South Park* and *Family Guy*. People like to talk about him. Ask a typical college student what he or she thinks about Jesus, they are likely to say, *“He’s one cool dude. He was all about love, and that’s what I want be about. I believe in him. His teachings are so spiritual ... his words are so pure...”* But then ask that same student what they think about the church, and their countenance will change as all kinds of negative images come to mind. The church clearly suffers from an image problem – and not just with young people.

Some folks are downright hostile to the church: Lots of folks will say something like this: *“When I think of church I think of Bible thumpers. I think of a bunch of pseudo Christians who are dogmatic and narrow-minded and judgmental; they think they know more than anyone else and are constantly telling other people what to believe....Where do they get off? Don’t get me wrong. I like Jesus. The problem is people who say they are following him and who don’t. And you find them in droves in churches.”* (It is the old “the church is full of hypocrites” argument – to which I am always tempted to respond, *“Of course the church is full of hypocrites. None of us completely walks our talk. Chances are, you don’t either. Why don’t you come join us – we could use one more.”*) Clearly the church has a lot of work to do to change this negative image. We are supposed to be sharing *good* news after all.

Still others will launch into a tirade about all the bad experiences they have had in church - how church dumped a load of guilt on them – how they were forced to go to church. Others will talk about how archaic and boring the church is.

More often than not, I find that people are not so much hostile to the church, as they find it irrelevant. *“Who needs it? What’s the church have to do with Jesus? I can follow Jesus on my own, thank you very much - I need no help from organized religion.”* That’s a popular negative buzzword these days, isn’t it –

there few things more unappealing than “organized religion.” (Is “*unorganized* religion better?”) Folks nowadays just want to do their own thing and be spiritual. People take special pride in being regarded as “spiritual,” but they wouldn’t be caught dead in a church.

This desire to do one’s thing apart from a faith community is so in tune with the times, where individualism runs rampant. We live in a day that strongly emphasizes privacy, separation, self-sufficiency and independence, in spite of all our social networking.

There is a cultural mindset that makes it hard for us to really commit ourselves to other people and be part of a community. There is this persistent idea in our culture that you are only responsible for yourself--that in the end you only have to answer for yourself and that really we should all mind our own business.

And so it follows in the spiritual realm of life, faith becomes a strictly private, individual matter. Faith is only between you and God. *It’s “Jesus and Me,”* for as the song goes ‘*He walks with me and he talks with me.*’ There is no need to be part of a community of faith.

They want Jesus but not the church.

The trouble is: *you can’t have Jesus without the church.* Let me explain.

We have to understand a few things about the church.

First of all, Jesus founded it. If you don’t like the church, blame him. It was his idea from the beginning. We read in Matthew how, after Peter made his great confession of faith, Jesus turned to him and said, “*I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.*”

Commentators disagree over what is meant by “this rock”. Most likely it is Peter himself (whose name means rock) upon which Jesus will build his church – since he was the leader of the disciples and the first to voice his belief in Jesus as the Messiah. Or the rock may simply be a reference to Peter’s faith and all who share his belief.

The point is, the church is Jesus’ idea. Jesus invented it. The church belongs to him; it is *his* church and he wants to build it. The word for “church” in the original Greek is the word “ecclesia.” It means literally, ‘called out ones.’ Jesus makes clear that creating and building a called-out community of believers is central to plans. The folks who say they like Jesus but not the church are discounting what is clearly of great importance to Jesus.

Secondly, Jesus not only founded the church, he continues to lead it and to empower it. The church is his body in the world; the church is his voice and his hands and his feet – his continuing ministry in the world. His Spirit indwells the church and the Spirit uses it to accomplish his saving purposes.

This is the truth that we lift up today in our celebration of Pentecost – the Spirit creating the church, breathing life into it and causing it to move out in mission.

We saw how, as the disciples were gathered in the upper room, the Spirit of Christ – the Holy Spirit – fell upon them with a mighty rush of wind and with tongues of fire dancing upon their heads and they all began to speak in other tongues. The Spirit sent them out into the streets where the diverse crowd could hear the good news spoken in their own language. Everyone was amazed. Peter and the disciples spoke with conviction and power and people believed and were baptized. A new community began to form. The followers of Jesus began to meet together to devote themselves to the apostle's teaching and to the breaking of bread and to prayer. An amazing kind of unity was established among them, in spite of their different languages and nationalities. And together they moved out into the world to share the good news.

The church was born. The day of Pentecost marks the official birthday of the Christian church. It is the day the church was formed and launched on its mission to *"declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light."*

So if you want Jesus, but you don't want anything to do with the church, you have a problem, for the church is the very means by which the Lord Jesus Christ accomplishes his purposes in the world; the church is his body. The church means everything to Jesus. And it ought to mean everything to those who would follow him.

Now most people would say that you can be a good Christian without being part of the church. Biblically speaking, it is impossible. As the Apostle Paul put it, *"For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink."* To believe is to belong; it is to be part of a Spirit-filled body. A solitary Christian, a lone ranger doing his or her thing, without relating to the body, is simply unthinkable.

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul describes in greater detail the image of the body, and saying we Christians are all organically related to one another; we are as interdependent as the organs in a human body. There is no room here for rugged individualism! Because the body is an organic unity it can't be divided without damage to the whole. A member removed from the body ceases to exist. To deliberately cut yourself off from the fellowship of believers is to cut yourself off from Jesus himself.

To be sure, Jesus calls each of us to make our own individual response to him and to his message. But at the same time we automatically become part of a *"chosen race, a kingdom of priests, a holy nation."* We become part of a great and noble family--the household of God. God gives us brothers and sisters in the faith (whether we want them or not). As Eugene Peterson reminds us, *"When we become Christians, we are among brothers and sisters in faith. No Christian is an only child."*

So to say, *"I love Jesus, but I'll have nothing to do with the church"* is to say, in effect, *"I will not be part of the body of Christ. I will not associate with his family."*

So how can you love Jesus but not his body?

I can see why people are quick to say they love Jesus, but not the church. Sometimes the church can be quite unlovable. No doubt about it; the church does not fully reflect the light and love of Jesus Christ. In

fact, it can do a pretty poor job of it. The church often fails to present the good news of Jesus in a winsome way. The church can easily lose its focus. It can become superficial and hypocritical and distracted from its mission, majoring in minors. The church has a way of taking the most exciting news in the world and making it boring as all get it out – and that’s a crime. The church has often disappointed the Lord and caused him all kinds of grief. All we can pray is “*Lord, have mercy.*”

But know this: the Lord will never up on the church – he says not even the gates of hell will prevail against it. He will continue to use it- faults and all - and his Spirit will continue to indwell it. God still has plans for his church. That’s a comforting thought for those of us who care about the church but who are well aware of its shortcomings.

Those who say they like Jesus but not the church, may well wish there was a perfect church to belong to. Unfortunately, there is no such church, for the simple reason that there are no perfect Christians. Those who think they can find a perfect church will search in vain. It has been said rather facetiously, if you think you have found the perfect church, don’t join it, for you will ruin it!

Someone penned these words:

*I think that I shall never see
A church that’s all it ought to be;
A church whose members never stray
Beyond the straight and narrow way;
A church that has no empty pews,
Whose pastor never has the blues;
A church whose elders always speak,
And none is proud and all are meek.*

*Such perfect churches there may be,
But none of them are known to me.
But still, we’ll work and pray and plan
To make our own the best we can.*

It’s easy to take potshots at the church. Rather than criticize the church for all its failings and weakness and making a point of staying away, shouldn’t they be doing their part to make the church better? Why abandon the church that Jesus so cares about, when they could be expending their energies to reform it, to make the church more like Jesus intended?

You don’t like the church. Okay, then, make it better. But you can’t love Jesus and forsake his body. You can’t follow Jesus and give up on the community that bears his name. Jesus hasn’t.

Where else will believers be challenged by the Word of God? Where else will they find encouragement and support for living the Christian life? Where else will they find hope and inspiration for doing good works?

If you truly love Jesus, you’ll want to be part of the church. He founded it, he empowers it, and he wants to bless you and me he through it. Thank God for the church!