

# To What Church Would Jesus Belong?

Acts 2:42-47 | 5/7/2017

Here's a funny thing about the religions of the world: They often don't resemble their founders. Islam and Muhammad. Buddhism and Buddha. Christianity and Jesus. The dots don't always connect. Columnist Nicholas Kristof observes that "Muhammad raised the status of women in his time, yet today some Islamic clerics bar women from driving." Buddha would probably be horrified by the racial segregation that Buddhists in Myanmar impose on minority Muslims. And although Jesus was a radical who challenged the establishment, Christianity has been so successful that in many parts of the world it has actually *become* the establishment. Religions don't always resemble their founders.

Brian McLaren, one of my favorite authors, takes this even farther. In his book *The Great Spiritual Migration*, he writes that "our religions often stand for the very opposite of what their founders stood for."

Why is this? Well, the founders of religions are usually bold and charismatic visionaries. They inspire people with their fresh insights and their moral imaginations. But over time, their teachings are preserved by religions that are often run by risk-averse bureaucracies. Instead of being bold and visionary, religions become obsessed with money, power and success. That's why there was a popular video produced a few years ago called, "Why I Hate Religion, but Love Jesus."

Because Christianity has too often become disconnected from Jesus, many people are getting sick of the church. Before a recent worship service in Iowa, the pastor read aloud a note that had been handed to him a few moments earlier. "It says here that I should announce that there will be no B.S." He tucked the piece of paper in his pocket and added, "I'm hoping they mean 'Bible Study.'"

Or to give you another example: I recently met someone at a funeral who seemed quite concerned to convince me she was a spiritual Christian person, but who did not attend church because of the way she had been treated by the members of the congregation she had once attended. The saddest part is, it is not the first time I have heard that kind of story.

People want a church that is true to Jesus, aligned with his ministry and mission. So we have to ask ourselves, as McLaren does, "What would it mean for Christians to rediscover their faith?" What would it mean for us to rediscover Christianity as "a just and generous way of life, rooted in contemplation and expressed in compassion?"

For this to happen, McLaren says that we need to migrate, moving from one way of life to another. In particular, he challenges us to move from expressing our faith only as a system of beliefs "to expressing it as a loving way of life." This is a migration away from religious bureaucracy and back to the vision of our founder, Jesus Christ. It's a move away from pointing fingers in condemnation to opening our hands to alleviate human suffering. It's a migration from going in debt for a building program to spending time making disciples -- that is, living like the first Christians did as described in Acts and today's text. A just and generous way of life, rooted in contemplation and expressed in compassion. That's the kind of religion that Jesus founded. And it's the answer to the question: What church would Jesus belong to today?

In Acts 1, Jesus tells his followers, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth" (1:8). Then he disappears. His words become true according to the account in Acts 2 when the Holy Spirit comes upon them -- Acts tells us that "all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability" (v. 4).

Immediately, the followers of Jesus become witnesses. They begin to speak about "God's deeds of power" in languages that are clear to the international crowd that is gathered in Jerusalem (v. 11). Then the apostle Peter begins to speak about the life and death of Jesus, giving testimony to how "God raised him up, having freed him

from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power" (v. 24). These words resulted in the baptism of 3,000 people in one day alone!

But the power of the Christian message was communicated not only by words, but by deeds. Acts tells us that the members of the church "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (v. 42). They shared everything -- in fact, "they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need" (v. 45). Because of this just and generous way of life, rooted in prayer and expressed in compassion, the church had "the goodwill of all the people." It continued to grow, day by day, as "the Lord added to their number those who were being saved" (v. 47).

Clearly, this is the kind of religion that resembles its founder. It is precisely the kind of church that Jesus would want to belong to -- one defined by a loving way of life. So what does such a life look like?

*First, it is a life that is not attached to material things.* A pastor was met by a church member at the door after worship. The pastor commented on the great tie the man was wearing. The man smiled, thanked him and immediately -- right there at the door -- took it off and gave it to the pastor. Everyone seemed shocked by such a radical act of public generosity. Of course, after the pastor received the tie from his church member, he had a conversation with his associate pastor. The associate was impressed by the gift, but he couldn't resist asking the pastor a question: Why didn't you compliment the man on *the car* he was driving?!

Jesus wants to be part of a church that is generous and is not attached to material things. A church of this kind existed in Jerusalem, where members "would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need" (v. 45). Such congregations today put church mission ahead of church maintenance, and give generously to programs that feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, welcome strangers, rescue vulnerable children and visit people in prison. They are not reluctant to practice extravagant generosity.

*Second, a loving way of life that is open and receptive to others.* Jesus is a model of receptivity, and he challenges us to be open to the needs of others. In the gospel of Mark, Jesus gets out of a boat and immediately receives a request from a leader of the synagogue to come and heal his daughter. As Jesus is going to her, he is interrupted by a woman with a bleeding problem. Instead of being annoyed, Jesus attends to her, and then finally makes it to the leader's house, only to find that the little girl is dead. But Jesus is not discouraged -- he then he raises the little girl from the dead (Mark 5:21-43).

Jesus shows us that the power of God is seen clearly in a life of openness and receptivity to the needs of others. In Jerusalem, "awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles" (v. 43). They cared for people around them, and as a result they had "the goodwill of all the people" (v. 47).

*Third, a loving way of life that is marked by spiritual maturity.* In the Jerusalem church, the members "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (v. 42). They made sure that they were nourished by teaching and preaching, communion and prayer. Spiritual feeding was needed before church members could go out and feed the hungry around them.

Jesus wants to be part of a church that is spiritually mature, rooted in prayer and contemplation. The fruits of such a community are acts of compassion and generosity. Jesus wants us to enjoy this kind of life -- one marked by a lack of attachment to material things, by openness and receptivity to others and by spiritual maturity. He wants us to build a community of justice and generosity, one that is rooted in contemplation and committed to acts of compassion.

If we can do that, the Christian church won't be ignored by the world as irrelevant. Instead, it will receive the goodwill of the people. "It is not the bureaucracy that inspires me, or doctrine, or ancient rituals or even the most glorious cathedral," writes Nicholas Kristof, "but rather a Catholic missionary doctor in Sudan treating bomb victims, [or] an evangelical physician achieving the impossible in rural Angola. ... They fill me with an almost holy sense of awe. Now, that's religion." That's a church that Jesus would be proud to join.

**PASTOR KEITH**