

THE SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND JESUS

In many generations, this passage has been of great comfort to the faithful. No matter what their suffering or hardship, Christians were reassured that good would come, that they would bear fruit, if they stayed close and connected to Jesus. They maybe could not see it yet and did not know the end of the story, but by staying close and walking in His Way, they knew that Jesus was in charge and that their lives and their efforts would be woven into the tapestry of His will. Indeed Jesus, backed by God, would continually provide them with all that was necessary to accomplish His will.

In our own day and time, at least in many liberal churches, this may be one of the more alarming passages in the Bible. It has unexpected teeth to it. First of all, it reminds us that we must be pruned – a thing no American ever likes to think about. And while the need for pruning is obvious on an individual level – especially when we think about it for others – it is true of a church as well. A church that never loses any members is going to bear pretty scrawny fruit. There may be quite a bit of it, but it will hardly be worth gathering. This principle would not have surprised any generation that came before us.

But the passage is more adamant than that. Jesus is the vine – the source of life and nourishment – for every Christian, and for every Christian church. The more we cut ourselves off from Him, the more we wither and die. If we separate ourselves from Him for long enough, we get lopped off altogether. Verse five states it point-blank: “*Apart from me you can do nothing.*” Well, you can still walk about and brush your teeth, but the sense from the original Greek meaning is that you will have no power. You will be unable to accomplish anything of importance.

Few people in the liberal church seem to believe this precept anymore. We think we can devise and design any program we want to. We think we can help anybody we decide to if we can just talk ourselves into being generous. We try to run the church off our own intelligence, our own sentimentality, our own caring ... and *make* it work. Jesus maybe awakened our consciences long ago, but nobody really needs Him anymore. We got the point; now just get out of the way and let us show how wondrously loving we are.

The fascinating thing is: The liberal church has been proving this passage for the last thirty years. It has gotten further and further away from Jesus, and it has been shriveling and dying ever since. Nobody yells about love louder; nobody tries to champion more causes; nobody claims more compassion for more needy or dispossessed or disenfranchised people. But we keep shriveling, closing churches, cutting budgets, attracting fewer and fewer members. We pay scant attention to Jesus; we study Him and His Way fast and shallow, if at all; our prayers are a scandal. That is, we still pray for help, but we seldom pray to find out what God wants of us in the first place, so sure are we that we have that part all figured out. *“Apart from me you can do nothing.”* Could it be that this was not a resolution for us to discuss and vote on, but a warning – and a promise?

To such thoughts I often receive the comment: “But I like to think of Jesus and God as being loving.” By whose definition? And just because somebody loves you, that does not mean they are going to make water run uphill for you. God is a careful Creator, and the principles that Creation runs on have their purpose. They do not need to change – we do.

Some of you know that I was raised a Quaker. The Quakers have a saying: “Institutions exist for the painless extinction of the ideas which gave them birth.” The fire of the Spirit falls. People are transformed and inspired. They band together and move to the tune and the joy of the new light and possibility. Then they elect officers, write bylaws, form committees ... and pretty soon nobody can even remember what started it all in the first place. Families are institutions, churches are institutions, schools are institutions, the government is an institution. All of them are in mortal danger, all the time, of losing their very reason for being.

Quakers were not naive enough to pretend that they did not need institutions in this physical realm. But they knew that any day that an institution is not in renewal – is not consciously remembering and reforming its primary loyalty to the light that called it into being – on any careless or mindless day, an institution is in decline. It is turning into the enemy of its own purpose. The “life” is no longer in the institution; only the methods and processes remain. The day you look at your spouse and see only the duty and obligation, the light is going out. You must go back and find the light, or it gets worse and worse. “Institutions exist for the painless extinction of the ideas which gave them birth.” This

is just a way of saying: “Stay close to Jesus, stay close to the Spirit, or we will lose it all.” What is your *own* personal relationship with Jesus at this point in your life? That is the first and most important thing for any of us to tend to. If we lose that, we are no longer a church. And by the way, all of us do lose it from time to time. This is supposed to be a place that helps people regain it.

Major efforts have been made, of course, to shape and form perfect institutions. The majority of these efforts have tried to merge the political and the religious spheres. Religion is supposed to bring light, inspiration, moral order, and purpose to society. And so the vast majority of political systems on earth have been theocratic. What are perceived to be the laws of God are the laws of the state. Church and state are a team, a partnership. Church and state are one.

But here in the United States, since all of us have lived our lives in an experimental departure from this approach, it is hard for us to remember that we are not the norm. It constantly confuses us when we read the New Testament, for instance, and discover that priests are political leaders, and that when Jesus challenges the religious establishment, that *is* the government of the nation. There is no such thing as “secular” in first-century Palestine. Actually, our country’s own roots are in a theocracy. Our Puritan forebears began the New England colonies in a dramatic and very intentional theocracy. For a time, you could not vote in this country unless you were a member in good standing of a Congregational church.

That was long ago and far away. In our own time, we have seen the emergence of godless states. Such a thing could hardly have been conceived of in an earlier century. And now some people are wondering whether our own experiment of separating church and state will end up more godless than communism. Certainly it is already true for many, but unlike communism, it has not been forced upon them. If you end up faithless in our country, you did not want faith very much. And despite its many foibles, I suspect most of us are strong advocates of the principle of the separation of church and state.

In any case, the real problem in our day and culture and society is not the separation of church and state, it is the separation of church and Jesus. Where do you go today if you want to be a Christian? I mean, if you have some spiritual hunger and awareness, and you are not afraid

to be religious, where do you go to *be* a Christian? You would think a Christian church might be a logical place to try.

I am not talking about anything “cut-and-dried.” I have been religious for as far back as I can remember. I was called into the ministry in what was for me a dramatic spiritual encounter in the summer of my sixth-grade year. I became a Christian at about age twenty-three (and twenty-six, and thirty-one, and forty-eight, and I am hoping for a new hit at about sixty-two). Nothing is cut-and-dried. Nevertheless, I aimed for and worked hard to become an ordained minister because Christianity became my top love and interest. And you know what? Ever since the day I was ordained, people (inside the church, mind you) have tried to turn me into everything and anything *except* a minister. I am supposed to be a politician, welfare worker, sociologist, psychologist, recreation director, stand-up comic, television personality, coach, janitor, advertising agent, businessman, and salesman (just to name a few). I have regard for all these vocations, and many others. But had I wanted to be those things, I would have gone into those fields. Where can I go today if I want to be a minister in a Christian church?

But it’s okay; I’m used to it. What I really care about is: Where can people go today if they want to be Christians? *This* church needs to be one of the places.

In many places and in many cases, the church is not about Jesus anymore. I do not mean it tries and fails. That would be perfectly understandable – nobody ever fully grasps, comprehends, and transcends well enough to praise, honor, teach, and follow Jesus the Christ in a way we could call adequate. But in our time, we have seen the church disassociate itself from Jesus more and more. And I think Jesus eventually returns the favor. A lot of churches seem to have very little of the power and presence of Christ left within their fellowship. It is as if, after being rejected long enough, He departed.

Let’s slow down and go over it more carefully.

- I.) First, there are those who say:
KEEP THE CHURCH, BUT FORGET JESUS.

These people are, of course, inside the church. That is, they are members in good standing. They come, they give money, they participate. Very frequently, they are in positions of influence and leadership. They see the church as an influential community organization. They know the church is one of the places in our society where people gather, where people care, and where people are perhaps more vulnerable to appeals for worthy causes than most anywhere else. So these people want to keep the church. It is an important community organization. They even, at times, want it to be strong and successful. But they primarily see the church as a tool they can use to change and improve society. That is, they want to use the church, its people, and its resources to support whatever social causes they favor. They downplay, and sometimes even ridicule, the importance of Jesus. Jesus represents to them a competing influence with a different agenda. They have an aversion to anything that suggests personal loyalty or allegiance to Jesus – to anything that claims Him as Savior, or Son of God, or Special Messenger in any way greater than any other enlightened human being. They do not love Jesus, they have no desire to follow Him, and they feel no gratitude toward Him (as in “You saved my life, and my very soul”). They know maybe five things Jesus said in regard to loving your neighbor, and they trot out those sayings as if they were the heart and core of the Gospel, using them as if they were proof that we must all join them in whatever cause they are espousing. But they have no Christian motives or beliefs. They are humanists through and through – or, as Jesus would have said, “wolves in sheep’s clothing.”

What makes it complicated is that there are always some of Jesus’ people involved in every worthy cause. That is, they are involved with the cause because their prayers have sent them there. But they love Jesus and they care about the church as Jesus’ body on earth, and supporting the cause is only one way they are trying to be obedient to His will. In time, you can usually discern the difference because these people also pray, study the Bible, and participate in the life of the church as Jesus’ people – all independent of, and more important to them than, any specific cause.

Nevertheless, one segment of our society is saying: KEEP THE CHURCH, BUT FORGET JESUS.

- II.) Another group is saying:
LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR, DO WHAT IS RIGHT,
BUT FORGET JESUS *AND HIS CHURCH*.

I do not have a lot of agenda with these people. They do not bother me, and I do not bother them. They are an important segment of our society, and we are not adversaries. Even though we would disagree on almost every important question in life, we are only accidental enemies. They think soccer or making money or being popular is more important than the Kingdom of Heaven, because they do not take the Kingdom of Heaven seriously yet. They do not know that the Kingdom is right here all around us. On occasion we might find ourselves vying for influence when it comes to other people's loyalties, but the conflict usually stays pretty benign.

- III.) The first category says:
KEEP THE CHURCH, BUT FORGET JESUS.
The second says:
LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR, DO WHAT IS RIGHT,
BUT FORGET JESUS *AND HIS CHURCH*.
The third category says:
KEEP JESUS, FORGET THE CHURCH.

These are the people I am after. These are the people I am hoping *you* will go after. These are the lost sheep. They are confused. Some of them are scared, or hurt. Some of them simply have not yet comprehended the information. But if they love and care about Jesus, they are our people. We do not *go* to church – we *are* the church. If these people love Jesus, *they* are the church. They just don't know it yet.

So why do some people want to keep Jesus and forget the church? Many of them have been members of a church in the past. Many of them consider themselves spiritual people. Some of them continue to look for significant religious experiences in retreats or conferences or any other setting that does not threaten to involve them in an ongoing community. What has happened?

Well, one thing that has happened is they got mixed up in a church that wanted to “keep the church, but forget Jesus.” They found themselves entangled in a church full of activist causes where people were putting forth great energy, but no feeding was going on. If you work hard and never eat, you will either die or have to get away from there. Liberal

churches are famous for whipping people into endless social causes without taking time for nourishment. Jesus said to Peter: “*Feed my sheep.*” If you feed the sheep, they are going to produce a lot, just by being who they are.

And that is another aberration of the liberal church: It thinks nobody is doing anything unless the *leaders* of the church organized the cause and drew everybody into it. It does not seem to occur to them that the *people* have skills and jobs and relationships all over the place, and that if these people are the true church, then they are most effective where they are most *naturally* engaged in the world, not where some hotshot, know-it-all preacher *thinks* they should be engaged. I know that a faithful church can sometimes accomplish wondrous things when the Spirit is honored, the people band together, and opportunity and devotion and guidance all coincide. But sometimes the church today is interrupting the real service in order to stroke the ego of some preacher or church leader.

And that is not the only pattern. Some sheep get lost by getting into churches where Jesus is talked about all the time, but it ends up seeming like Jesus is used as a weapon – a method of control and conformity. They end up thinking they must leave all churches in order to get back to a real relationship with Jesus the Christ. The “Jesus of the church” seems to them to be contrived, canned, defined, regimented. So they want to forget the church and get back to loving the real Jesus.

I hope you will be on the lookout for such people – people who love Jesus but have no more use for the church. I hope you will identify them, sympathize with them, and join them ... until they join you. They need us, and we need them.

Today it is unclear to hordes of people that if we love Christ, we serve His church – and that if we serve the church, we serve Christ. This is not a statement about the perfection of any human organization; we live in a broken world. But the truth is, *being* the church – building up the body, working to make the life of the church strong and helpful – is the best way we have to express our love for Jesus, and to be part of the spiritual Path He calls us to. The fact is, if the church dies, the name of Jesus and the invitation to His Way die with it. Nobody else is going to carry this name or this invitation in any *significant* way. We will, or nobody will.

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And the most telling thing of all for me: I know, finally, that I cannot help any human being, anywhere on earth, in any significant way *unless* I can get them to Jesus and into Jesus' church (faith family). That is the sermon. That is what I hope you will argue with (if you need to argue). And that, by the way, is what this morning's Scripture passage was saying to us. "*Apart from me you can do nothing.*"

I CANNOT HELP ANY HUMAN BEING, ANYWHERE ON EARTH, IN ANY SIGNIFICANT WAY UNLESS I CAN GET THEM TO JESUS AND INTO JESUS' CHURCH. And neither can you. All other help just helps them to last a little longer, in the hope that this will happen.