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JESUS YES, CHURCH NO

Sometimes we hear variations on the theme, “Jesus yes, church no.” It may be someone saying they believe in God, but can’t stand religion. Others say they can worship God anywhere, so they don’t need the church. All of them present an unrealistic and unnatural view of Jesus.

These statements indicate that there is a lot of misunderstanding about what the church is. Even among Christian preachers we find these misunderstandings. A lot of articles have been written about what the church is not. Sometimes there is validity in defining what the church is not; however, that provides an incomplete picture of the church. To define the church by what it is not is sometimes like trying to define an automobile by its dissimilarity to other things. You can say an automobile is not a horse, it is not a boat, it is not an airplane, and it is not a box. These are all valid, and sometimes descriptive, statements about a car, but they don’t give any idea about what a car *is*. In the same way, defining the church by what it is not is unhelpful in dealing with people who do not know what it is.

The church is a body. It is a collection of organs working together for common survival. Paul was particularly fond of this picture.

For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. (1 Cor 12:13-14)

More precisely, the church is the body of Jesus. “Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.” (1 Cor 12:27) And lest somebody miss the concept that the body is the church or the church is the body, the very next verse speaks about God putting various organs in the church. Furthermore, Jesus is “the head of the body, the church.” (Col 1:18) Now this puts the holders of the “Jesus yes, church no” doctrine in a precarious position. It makes them say of a woman, “I like her head, but I can’t stomach her body.” Even more, it would separate the head from the body. We all know what happens when the head and the body are separated. The body without the head is dead; but equally, the head

without the body is dead. If you want Jesus without the church, you might as well put him in a jar of formaldehyde on the mantelpiece. Jesus without the church is merely a trophy on the wall.

In another picture, the church is the bride of Christ. Based on historical and textual context, the new Jerusalem of Revelation 21 is probably the church. “And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” (Rev 21:2) But we don’t have to depend on that probability. Paul says without a doubt that the church is the bride of Christ. After describing how a wife should relate to her husband, and the husband to the wife, Paul says he is not describing a mere earthly marriage.

For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church. (Eph 5:31-32)

The story is told about Mark Twain’s being invited to a gathering. The invitation specified that it was for Mr. Twain, but his wife was not invited. Shortly after the event, he sent the host a bill for his standard personal appearance fee. When the host objected, Twain pointed out that he was invited, but his wife wasn’t. In his mind that meant that the host wanted him there as Mark Twain, the writer and humorist. If he had invited him in a non-professional capacity he would have asked the couple, rather than the individual.

Those who want Jesus without the church are like the host at this event. They want the husband, but not the bride. They want to show off Jesus, but don’t want to get to know him personally. The head without the body. The husband without the bride. It is just unnatural.

Contents

Jesus Yes, Church No	1
Ye Have Heard, Part 2	2
In Context of Court	4

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YE HAVE HEARD, PART 2

Benjamin Franklin (or Mark Twain, or both) said, “Believe only half of what you see, and none of what you hear.” While that may be a little extreme, Jesus did say not to believe everything you hear. The religious authorities of his day had developed certain traditions that were not exactly what the Law taught. Sometimes these traditions were honestly developed as a hedge to keep people from getting close to breaking the Law. At other times these traditions seemed to consolidate the power of the leaders, or at least to coincide with their personal wishes. In the August 2015 issue of *Minutes With Messiah* we looked at the first of some of these traditions, where Jesus established his authority by telling the people the truth about what they had heard. What follows is a look at the rest of the “you have heard” statements from the Sermon on the Mount.

Retaliation

Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take

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away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away. (Matt 5:38-42)

At first this sounds like Jesus is contradicting the Law of Moses, rather than the traditions of the elders. Three times in the Torah the statement “eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot” appears. (Ex 21:24; Lev 24:20; Deut 19:21) In one sense, the context does show that he is countermanding the Law. In another though, perhaps he is addressing a misconception about the Law.

Even today, some people take *lex talionis* to an extreme it was never intended to go. The modern concept of “an eye for an eye,” and perhaps that of the Pharisees of the first century, is that if someone does you harm you are obligated to return the favor. In fact, many go so far as to say that if I am harmed, I have the right to do worse to that

person. This goes against the concept as expressed in the Law of Moses. The rule was actually put in to limit damages. America has become a litigious society. People bring law suits over the most minor things, and expect to receive huge settlements out of proportion to the harm done. This is just the sort of thing that was limited by *lex talionis*. An eye for an eye meant just that. If someone puts out your eye, the maximum penalty that they can be assessed is the loss of their eye. If they knock out a tooth, they stand to lose only the same tooth, not several teeth.

Jesus puts it into a different context, however. While “eye for eye” limits punishment to an equivalent degree, he says that love—which is the whole Law—demands that we don’t even go for an equivalent retaliation. Rather, we should not retaliate at all. Moreover, we should exceed what is demanded of us.

Some legalists will argue the extent of what Jesus says. If we turn the other cheek and the person continues to strike, are we justified then in striking back? Can we stop at the extra mile, rather than going a third? If a man asks forgiveness 70 times a day we must forgive, but if he doesn’t ask can we demand payment? Or, more famously, can we judge which panhandlers to give to and which to ignore?

Perhaps Jesus is taking the same position Paul took with the Corinthians. After chiding them for taking each other to law before unbelievers, he said, “Why do ye not rather take wrong? why do ye not rather be defrauded?” (1 Cor 6:7) The principle seems to be that one may retaliate when harmed by a brother, but if it could bring discredit on the church one should be willing to suffer wrong. What Paul objected to was Christians airing their dirty laundry before unbelievers. Jesus may be saying the same thing. It is better to appear to be harmed and show love than to demand justice. Will some take advantage? Of course; that is always a danger when acting out of love. But still love, anyway.

Love and Hate

Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the

publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect. (Matt 5:43-48)

It seems to be the most natural thing in the world to love friends and hate enemies. In the social media it is common to see people who claim to be Christians express hateful thoughts against Muslims, gays, abortionists, and certain politicians. We pray for the leaders of our country, but we secretly (or openly) wish the worst on the leaders of whomever our leaders say is our current enemy. After all, what are enemies but those that we hate?

The Messiah taught love. Love for self, love for the lovable, and especially love for the unlovable (our enemies). Love is the ultimate revenge. (Prov 25:22; Rom 12:20) Love is the one thing for which an enemy has no answer. If we hate, he can hate back. If we fight, he can fight back. But if we love, he can't love back and remain an enemy.

One of the points Jesus is making here is that our ultimate aim is to be like God. Pray for those who curse you, that you may be like God. And that is just what Jesus did as he was being murdered. "Father, forgive them." (Lk 23:34) Remember that God blesses the good and the evil. More than that, God loves the unlovable, us. "But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. ... For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life." (Rom 5:8, 10) If God could love and forgive us when we were his enemies, should we not do the same?

Should we try to be better than unbelievers? Jesus thinks so. He says that if we only love those we choose to associate with, we are no better than infidels. Loving our enemies not only shows that we are like God; it also shows that we are trying to be better than others. Not better in a prideful sense; just better because that is what we are called to be.

At the end of his time on earth, Jesus commanded his followers to make disciples. (Matt 28:19-20) The only effective way to do that is by loving. If we don't love our enemies, we have no motive to disciple them. If we don't show love, we have no hope to disciple them. "By this shall all know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." (Jn 13:35)

Ye have heard

Sometimes we tend to miss the forest by looking at the trees. Having examined each of the "Ye have heard" statements, perhaps it might be important to examine the overarching theme of this section of Matthew 5. Each of the five topics has value in themselves, but Jesus may have been making an even broader point.

Where do you put your trust? What is your authority? Is it the preacher or the scriptures? Have we raised a generation who knows very well what they have

heard, but have not read it for themselves? Many people's faith is based entirely on what they have heard other people say the scriptures contain. They listen to the preacher diligently every week, but never open the Bible throughout the week.

Years ago in the American southwest it was common knowledge that it was a sin to dance, play cards, swim with people of the opposite gender, or drink alcohol in any form. It must have been so because our preachers and Bible class teachers (and sometimes parents) told us that these were clearly condemned in the Bible. A large portion of a whole generation rejected religion altogether when they learned that the scriptures were not quite so clear on these issues. When they learned that what they heard was not necessarily what Jesus and his followers taught, they rejected both their teachers and Jesus.

There is nothing wrong with listening to preachers and Bible class teachers. "How then shall they call on him

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in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?" (Rom 10:14) It is not the hearing, in itself, that is the problem. The great thing about Albuquerque-based Faith Comes By Hearing is that they distribute Bibles in over 900 languages, so people can hear the truth, not just the preacher. The danger comes when we hear the pet doctrines without checking them out against the scriptures.

Many people today fall under the "ye have heard" umbrella. Listen to the preachers in many of the mega- or media-churches, and try to find even one citation from the Bible. Some accurately or inaccurately quote scripture, but never tell anyone where to find it to verify it. Large sections of the population believe in some variation of premillennialism, not knowing that the doctrine has little or no basis in scripture. Various scholars have documented the number of times people thought they were quoting the Bible when they were actually quoting Shakespeare (which is understandable considering the date of the King James Version). Others assert that their favorite sins are acceptable because of misquotes of scripture or trust in another person who asserted that the Bible did not call it a sin.

If there is anything to be learned from this section of the Sermon on the Mount, it is probably not the individual lessons Jesus taught on five topics. The lesson to be learned is that we should not trust only those things we have heard. We need to be like the Bereans who "searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so." (Acts 17:11)

IN CONTEXT OF COURT

Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor men who sleep with men, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Cor 6:9-11)

This is a favorite passage of many. Sometimes it is a favorite of those who vehemently oppose homosexuality. For others it is a favorite because it shows that God is willing to forgive anyone. It is a good passage; but people often take it out of the context.

What is that context? He wasn't talking about sin, or God's grace, or how to get into the church. He wasn't propounding great theological truths. It seems strange, but this is the conclusion of a discussion about Christians taking other Christians to court before unbelievers.

Read it in that context:

Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unjust, and not before the saints? Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? and if the world shall be judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Know ye not that we shall judge angels? how much more things that pertain to this life? If then ye have judgments of things pertaining to this life, set them to judge who are least esteemed in the church. I speak to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you? no, not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren? But brother goeth to law with brother, and that before the unbelievers. Now therefore there is utterly a fault among you,

because ye go to law one with another. Why do ye not rather take wrong? why do ye not rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded? Nay, ye do wrong, and defraud, and that your brethren. Know ye not... (1 Cor 6:1-9)

Does this, perhaps, shed a slightly different light on this passage? It is not about sin, or salvation. It is about brotherhood.

Paul's initial complaint is that they were choosing unrighteous people to judge righteous matters. They may have been taking matters of faith to the unjust to judge. That would be like taking a matter of American civil law to a South African court for judgement. Why not settle the dispute in the proper jurisdiction? Why not take matters between believers to even the youngest novice in the church? Even he would be more qualified.

He goes on to say that it is not only wrong to expect an unbeliever to judge these matters. Even if you are in the right and a brother is taking away your rights in the church, it is better to be deprived than to take the matter to unbelievers. In fact, by taking these matters to the wrong court, the one being deprived was actually depriving the other of his rights.

And here is where the passage in question comes in. Don't you know that those in the kingdom are not unrighteous, like the judges you are using? Yes, they had various sins. They were once unrighteous, too. But now they have been cleansed. They have been made righteous. Does that not make them better judges of things to the church? Is not a person who has been forgiven much more likely to forgive much? Is not one who has known the consequences of and relief from sin more able to judge between others who have been so relieved? This is the real context of this passage. Trust your brother to judge fairly. After all, he was, and is, just like you.

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