

Question: I heard about a mother who wanted her thirteen-year-old autistic son to be in church on Sundays. While the church leaders had once felt the same way, they have now banned him from attending because he is disruptive and his erratic behavior threatens the safety of others. What would Jesus do?

Since I am not personally acquainted with this situation and do not have all the information about it, I am hesitant to pass judgment. I can see some justification for concern on the part of both the parent and the church leaders. However, I do believe that we can make some relevant observations from a study of the life and teachings of Jesus.

I would begin by observing that Jesus had great compassion for and ministered to those who were poor or sick and those who were rejected by others. On one occasion, two blind men cried out to Jesus as he came along. The crowd was bothered by them and told them to be quiet, but they shouted even louder. Jesus was not disturbed by their cries; instead, he had compassion on them and healed their eyes (Matthew 20:29-34). At another time, Jesus was approached by a man with leprosy asking to be made clean. While others refused to come near lepers, Jesus reached out and touched the man, curing him of his leprosy (Mark 1:40-45). Even those whose behavior was often violently erratic because of an evil spirit found refuge and help in the presence of Jesus (Mark 9:15-27; Luke 4:33-37). These are the kinds of people that were constantly drawn by the presence of Jesus. By finding a way to minister to them in their need, Jesus demonstrated the love of God at work in our world (Mark 1:45; Luke 4:37).

Furthermore, Jesus would not have allowed concern about worship rituals to take precedence over the life needs of individual souls. When his disciples were criticized by the religious leaders among the Jews for picking heads of grain to eat on a Sabbath, Jesus defended the disciples by quoting the Old Testament prophet Hosea: "If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent" (Matthew 12:7). According to Mark's gospel, Jesus also said, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27-28). Jesus would have endorsed the prophetic messages

which condemned Israel's worship as meaningless when they failed to show compassion for the poor, the fatherless, widows and other unfortunate people in our world (Isaiah 1:10ff; Jeremiah 7).

According to the New Testament, the church should be submissive to Christ as the body is to the head (Ephesians 1:22-23). Jesus intended that the church, as his body, should minister as he ministered, even to those who may require extra time, patience and effort. The church should be his representative before the world, and any failure to function as he did distorts the message of Christ before the world.

While I have great sympathy for the church that is dealing with this difficult situation, I do not believe that Jesus would ban this autistic young man from an assembly of worshippers. Because of his compassion for people like this, I believe Jesus would never give up until he found a way to minister to this family without placing others in an uncomfortable situation. In fact, this very situation presents a wonderful opportunity to demonstrate the spirit of Jesus before the community. Through prayer and thoughtful consideration, I believe a better way than exclusion can be found. Perhaps an extra worship time can be conducted for this young man, his mother and those with a compassion and willingness to help and encourage this family. Whatever is done, we need to remember that Jesus values every life, and so should we.

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