

The Church: Has It a Place in the Spiritual Life?

From the series: The Church: Critical Questions

Text: Mark 7:8; I Corinthians 12:7; 12:27; 13:13

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

The question this morning in this month of October, when we are thinking together about the church, is whether or not the church has a place in the spiritual life. A rather strange question, isn't it, because one would assume at least superficially that the church is precisely the place for the development and cultivation of the spiritual life. Of course, at its best, that's exactly what it is, and yet, the question is not ridiculous at all for, if you stop to think for a moment, the church as an organization, as an institution that is ministered to and over by flawed human beings, that is full of structures and traditions and all sorts of diverse baggage - the church as an institution can be a detriment to the spiritual life. It can dampen devotion and undercut the freshness of faith.

Christ Community over the years has been a place that has collected all sorts of birds with broken wings, wounded in the struggle of religion in its organizational and institutional forms. So I think probably it is perceived here immediately, that it is a legitimate question, the church can be a detriment to spiritual life. There are those who would say, "The church has no place in my spiritual life, and it was in finally shucking off the church that I found my spirit beginning to sing." Unfortunately, that has too often been the case. That is understandable because, whatever else the church is, as the mediator of the Spirit, as the arena in which God moves upon us by the Spirit, it is also a human organization and institution and, to that extent, it is a flawed body, and it can do damage.

Religion has been the source of great nobility and marvelous movements on the part of the human spirit, and it has a shadow side which has been to be a participant in some of the horrific experiences in the human story. So, to ask whether the church has a place in the spiritual life is an effort to get us to think together about the distinction between the spiritual pursuit, the pursuit of God, the experience of God, and our life together in an organized, religious institution. Obviously, it is my hope and my intention that a community like this foster spirituality and not hinder it or become a barrier to it. That can never be taken for granted and I think that we ought always, anew, to ask the question, "Is this

community such that it enhances human beings and inspires people and brings them into the experience of God, or has the institution moved into a phase in which, rather, it drains and detracts from the Spirit of God?" That's the question asked this morning.

As one looks back over the history of the church, obviously there have been those times again and again when the church became, not an institution inspiring, but an organization dominating and exploiting. If we simply think about the rise of religion, think of our own biblical tradition, the Jewish-Christian tradition (someone hears a voice, Abraham and Sarah move out, knowing not where they're going, and eventually out of that family comes a people enslaved in Egypt, and another one named Moses encounters a bush that burns but isn't consumed and has a sense of divine mission and calling, brings that people out of slavery through the wilderness, into their own land), we see that it is a movement, dynamic, alive. But, before too long, in that land, organization happens and structures are developed. Eventually, there's a king named David, a great politician, a savvy leader of the people, who organizes the nation. His son, Solomon, builds the magnificent temple, and before long this people who had heard the voice of God on Mount Sinai become a people who are domesticated, as it were, in the organized structures of religion with a priesthood and a temple and altar and sacrifices and all of the accouterments of organized and institutional religion, and all of that arising out of the founding vision, all of that a sort of natural and inevitable development and yet, a development which loses the spontaneity and the freshness of the first love, that driving vision that sweeps people along and lifts them up, and it becomes ordinary, it becomes *pro forma*, it becomes highly structured, routinized, and loses its soul. And through all of the experiences of that people here and there, now and again, a prophet's voice is raised, raised about the dominance of this institution, raised about the lack of soul and the emptiness. The prophets are silenced because their message is not popular.

One day on the banks of the Jordan River, a man named John stands up and bemoans the situation of his people, their religious life, the temple crowd, the collaboration with the Roman occupying power, and he points to another one by the name of Jesus and Jesus, with his own vision, his own particular fire and his own particular spirit, filled with the Spirit, challenges the institution, challenges the tradition of the elders to such an extent that they know they have to silence him, and in collaboration with the Roman authorities they put him to death because he had the audacity to stand up in the face of the whole temple establishment and say, "You've lost your heart; you've lost your soul; you've lost your way."

The religious institution, with all of the vested interests of those who are a part of it and who eat out of the trough has every reason to keep the status quo, but that which begins with a fresh blush of the winds of the Spirit, that which is, first of all, the experience of a new love, the freshness, the spontaneous movement of the

Spirit, that which is inspiring, liberating, and causes people to sing and to dance, becomes domesticated, ordinary, forgets the fact that it is a means to lift people heavenward and becomes an end in itself that uses people for its own ends, always justifying, of course, as being this divine institution, when all the time it is human, all too human, petty, mean-spirited, losing vision, becoming protective, defensive, perpetuating itself, when all of that about which it finds its life circling around is anachronistic, out of another day, refusing to move along with the wind of the Spirit. Jesus said, "You stick to human traditions rather than the commandment of God."

We have to read those Gospel passages, understanding that when they were written several decades after Jesus, they were written with the brokenness between the Jesus movement and the Rabbinic Jewish movement. I don't believe that Jesus himself in his own day would have had the sharpness of those discussions. But, there can be little doubt that Jesus challenged the temple establishment. There can be little doubt that the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, are reflective of that confrontation of Jesus with the religious establishment of his day, which eventuated in his death. It has always been so.

The little struggling Jesus movement, persecuted, hunted down, finally in the fourth century, with Emperor Constantine, becomes the established religion of the Empire. It becomes the dominant religious expression. Cathedrals are built and the religious leaders dominate the European continent. It becomes a lush institution. It becomes wealthy; it is corrupt. And in the 16th century there is a movement of Reformation and the church is re-formed according to the word of God, and reformed is a verb, an action verb. It's a verb of movement; it is a movement of renewal. And then, once again, just as has happened in the time of Jesus, the institutional forms of the church get rigid, brace themselves, will not be renewed, will not acknowledge that they've lost their first love, brokenness, the tearing, the rending of the body of Christ. The essence of that Reformation movement of the 16th century was never to absolutize any ecclesiastical form or creedal statement.

But, the renewal only lasts so long and before very long, the essence of that which was a spirit that it would reform and always be reformed by the word of God, the verb, becomes a noun. Now there is a reformed presence in the world and it becomes an adjective, so there is reformed worship and reformed evangelism and reformed theology. The verb degenerates into a noun, a static thing, another institution to be protected, to be defended, to be perpetuated, to resist the winds of the Spirit. And so, it goes. Over and over and over again. And the institution which ostensibly is organized in the human arena becomes a dominating, exploiting institution that uses people for its own end, its own aggrandizement, its own perpetuation. That's why organized religion in our day, the mainstream out of which we stem, of which we are a part, is in a survival mode, defensive and protective.

The *Utne Reader* is an interesting journal with commentary on the contemporary scene. There was an article this summer entitled "God With a Million Faces," and it began with the story of Ann Marie, who said that organized religion was, for her, dis-empowering. She said it's bogus. She took some of the trappings of her Christian upbringing, she added a pinch of Buddhism and a little bit of this and a little bit of that and she came up with a sect of one, the sect of Ann Marie. She is on her individual quest, her quest for spirituality, her own thirst and hunger for the experience of the living God which she couldn't find in the institution. She is an example of a very large trend in our day. We hear a lot about the vocal rhetoric, the Religious Right. We hear stories, news articles, etc., of the mega-churches that are growing by leaps and bounds, and we hear about the noisy part of religion which seems to be alive and well in the US of A. But, we don't hear much about the Ann Maries, the thousands and millions who have been disenchanted with organized religion, who have left the institutions. We hear a bit about the New Age and some of it is very bizarre, and some of it is more responsible, but all of it points to a deep spiritual hunger. It is very easy to say, "Well, the world is growing less religious, less spiritual. People are pursuing their own ends and their own pleasures," but I don't believe that for a moment. I believe that there is as much hunger and thirst in the human heart, in the human soul as ever there was. But, there are all kinds of people who have taken the warning that institutional religion can be bad for your spiritual life, and they've gone off on their own quest, because the institution can be an albatross on the human spirit, and I don't know of any movement that has been able to avoid that movement into organization and institutionalization, except maybe A.A.

We're familiar with the Twelve Steps of A.A. in terms of that personal healing and recovery, but A.A. also has its traditions in regard to it as a movement which has historically positioned itself against the possibility of becoming an institution with lands, buildings, and wealth.

Maybe in the Christian movement, the Quakers have avoided it with their little white frame buildings, coming together and sitting in a circle of silence. But you, what do you do? You hire a preacher. You build a building. You have to put a new roof on it. You have a Minister of Music and a large organ - all of the accouterments that make it such a pleasure to be a part of this community. And it can become a real drain and a drag. And it can ring the zest out of your spiritual life.

In the *Utne Reader*, in this same article, there are comments in the margins by six or eight people of all kinds of religious spiritual movements and traditions. I've printed a couple of them in the liturgy for you. One, in particular, Gangaji, I don't know who she is or what she's a part of, but I like what she says and that is that if the rituals and the forms can be the instruments by which the Mystery becomes present, then wonderful, but, she distinguishes very, very carefully between the freedom of the spirit and that ritualism that so easily comes and entraps us. And she reminds us that the people we follow were the people who

would not follow, that the ones that we have made our leaders, the Buddha, Jesus Christ, whomever, are the very ones who shattered the forms, who broke out of the tradition, who undercut the institution, who got back to the heart and the spirit of the matter. That's the way it is, isn't it? Someone sees a vision. Someone breaks through the crust, the barnacles, and then everyone says, "Ha, that's it!" And before long, that one becomes the one who's worshipped and followed and a whole new set of things are organized, institutionalized, absolutized, and before long you have to take an offering again.

Ann Marie says, "The church didn't do it for me. I've taken my tray and gone down the cafeteria line and borrowed a little of this and a little of that and I am a sect of one." But, there are voices in that same *Utne Reader* article that suggest the difficulty of being the sect of one, going it alone. We really do need community. It is possible for human community to enhance our individual lives and our walk and our quest for the reality of the Spirit. I think that's what Paul was trying to point out. The congregation in Corinth was exuberant, full of all kinds of gifts, and he had to write to them to calm down a bit, to recognize one another's gifts and to do things decently and in order. He reminded them that all spiritual diversity has one Source and that is the Spirit, and that all of the diverse gifts are to be used not for personal exaltation, but for the building up of the body. And so, he encourages those people in Corinth, in that community, to recognize the unity of their spiritual gift and their calling to be concerned for their brothers and sisters and the upbuilding of the body which is the image that he uses, the body of Christ. And then he says, "When you've discovered your gift, when you've brought your gift to the service of the rest, then let me show you an even more excellent way."

And he breaks out into that beautiful hymn of love, the 13th chapter of I Corinthians, in which he reminds us, as he reminded the Corinthian congregation, that the most profound proclamation, the proper creedal posture, the exuberant offering of oneself, making even the supreme sacrifice, apart from love, is nothing. And then he goes on to describe what love is and what love is not. He comes back, then, to remind them that all of the things that seem so important are really provisional, temporary, passing away, that there is finally faith and hope and love and the greatest of these is love.

You see, the church so easily becomes an end in itself. It takes so much to keep it going, to keep it on track, to keep it up, organize it, regulate it, supervise it, when what we really want, what we really need is the experience of God. So, let us be very certain that this organization called Christ Community never sacrifices the life and the spirit in order to be a little more stable, a little more solid in order to have a better future, in order to perpetuate itself. We don't have to go into the future. We don't have to become anything. In fact, to the extent that we are willing to let it all go, let it die, only then will we be free to allow the wind of the Spirit to blow where it will. Only if we can relativize this necessary organizational life, will we be set free to open ourselves to the Spirit, to love one another, to

recognize that everything takes second place to that community of love. When we become willing to unclench the fist and open our mind and heart, we can be free of compulsion, fear, manipulation, and the need for exploitation, finally freed up to walk the way of spirituality, the way of Jesus, in a community of love where the Spirit blows free, and where we can leave after gathering with the brothers and sisters on a marvelous Lord's Day like this and see a leaf or hear a child's cry, experience a lump in the throat, a tear on the cheek, and say, "That's why I believe."