

The Church: Who Needs It?

From the series: Tough Questions; No Easy Answers

Text: Ephesians 4:15

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Our summer sermon series, *Tough Questions; No Easy Answers*, concludes today with a focus on the church, the institutional form of the Christian religion: "The Church: Who Needs It!"

Who needs it? That is a question.

However, you may have noticed in the printed liturgy that the question is terminated with an exclamation point rather than a question mark. Who Needs It! This reflects not so much a genuine inquiry into who really needs the church as a statement reflecting a serious question about whether or not perhaps the church in its present forms and structures has a future; even more, whether it would be a serious loss if it continues in its present process of demise.

Let me acknowledge at the outset that I am not able to be completely objective in the contemplation of the question. Who needs it! is probably the expression of my own frustration with, and disappointment in, the institution in which I have been nurtured and to which I have given my life. You will simply have to hear me keeping my own bias before you.

Granting that, let me tie this sermon on the church in with that which I have been stressing throughout this series, namely, that religion is a human construct, a human creation, which in multiple religious forms and institutional structures is a response to the experience of God, the sense of a Presence that fills all things, a Mystery which is always hidden from us, yet so present in its absence that its reality cannot be denied.

This is true of religion in the earliest forms discovered in the practice of ancient and primitive peoples; it is true of the great world religions. Religion as a phenomenon of humankind is a humanly shaped response to an encounter from beyond or from the depths.

This is true of the Christian religion as it is institutionalized in the church in all the manifold forms and structures that have emerged over 2000 years and in all

the wide variety of churches with us in our day. The Christian church is a human creation, a human institution consisting of a belief system (doctrine), cultic forms for worship and devotion (liturgy/ritual), and a moral code (ethics).

To claim this does not deny that the Christian religion is a genuine and authentic response to God, that it is a mediator of truth, of revelation, that it is an agency of God's grace. It is simply to recognize that, in response to the revelation of the Mystery that is God in Jesus Christ and the grace that he mediates by God's Spirit, those who have been encountered by revelation and embraced by grace have created a religious institution we call the church in order to witness to their experience and pass on their faith.

The religious faith and institutional structure which provided the womb for the Christian faith was Judaism. One of the fruits of current study of the historical Jesus is our recognition that Jesus was a Jew. Of course, the church has always known this, but the fact is, the church has not recognized the Jewishness of Jesus sufficiently, nor done justice to the rootedness of Jesus in his own religious tradition.

He was born a Jew, lived as an observant Jew and died a Jew. It was Jewish tradition he was seeking to renew. It was the Jewish institutional religion he was seeking to dismantle in the fashion of Israel's prophets. From our present knowledge of Jesus' time from cross-cultural studies, we get a sense of the institutional forms and structures that he was up against.

We also recognize the Gospels as post-Easter documents that were based on oral tradition that went back in part to Jesus himself but, at their writing, were documents that reflected the situation of the Christian communities from which they arose decades after Jesus' life and ministry.

It seems apparent that Jesus never intended anything but the renewal of his own Jewish faith. The early Jesus movement that developed in the wake of Easter was a Jewish movement in its entirety. In the early years, the Jesus movement was a movement within Judaism. But, this was a time of ferment and crisis for Judaism. In a struggle with Rome who occupied her land, she saw her temple razed and Jerusalem destroyed.

The question was what would emerge as the ongoing Jewish tradition. By the time Matthew wrote his Gospel, from which we read this morning, two generations separated his community from Jesus himself. It was clear by the time Matthew wrote that the majority of Israel was not going to follow Jesus as God's Messiah. The Jesus Jewish movement had reached out to Gentiles. The movement was constituted of Jews and Gentiles and was taking on an identity over against Israel.

We see this in the passage read from Matthew 16. At Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks, "Who do people say that I am?" The disciples answered, Elijah or Jeremiah

or John the Baptist - one of the prophets. And then Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answers for the group, "You are the Christ (or Messiah), the son of the living God."

Jesus praises Peter for the answer - giving him the nickname Rock and declaring that on the Rock he would build his church.

It is fascinating that Matthew used Mark as his basic source, but in this instance, he goes beyond Mark. In Mark, Jesus does not give Peter his nickname, nor does he praise him; rather, he sternly warns the disciple to say nothing of this messianic identity.

But, even in Matthew's account, Jesus continues after his high praise of Peter to speak of his forthcoming suffering to which Peter objects, actually rebuking Jesus for such talk. In response, Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things."

Even though Matthew intends some six decades after Jesus to make Jesus the establisher of the church, he lets show through the constant peril in which the church will live - becoming human, all too human. The Protestant Church should never have argued with the Roman Church that Peter was the first Pope because if anyone puts the lie to papal infallibility, it is Peter. Calling Simon "Rock" may well have been a bit of Jesus' humor. Rock-like, he was not; human, he was.

Well, it seems we have a guest.

(At this point, "Peter" arrives, hurrying down the aisle, excited and emphatic.)

Peter: I'm Peter, and, "On this rock I'm gonna build my church." That's what he said. If you don't believe me, you can look it up. Oh, you just did. I never understood the rock thing. Who would call somebody a rock? Would you call somebody a loaf of bread, a tree? "Hey, Shrub, come over here." How would you like that? But, who could figure him? The way he talked sometimes? Very mysterious.

So, this is church, eh? A little breezy. Reminds me of the old days, Sermon on the Mount. No air-conditioning there. Whew! It was a scorcher. They don't tell you that, do they, in that book you got there? Ninety-eight degrees that day, and lots of humidity. But, this is just for fun today, right? You got your buildings for regular. I see you've gone to Sundays ... Saturday wasn't good enough? Anyway, I'm really pleased to see you've made it so big.

I kept telling Jesus, all we needed to do was get to the big boys, the movers and shakers, the Big Kahunas, show them we could work with them. I said, "Jesus - softer, softer. Ease up on the 'Woe is you, Pharisees,' stuff. And 'Woe to the lawyers.'" You just don't say "Woe to the lawyers" and get ahead in this world.

They got such a powerful lobby, you wouldn't believe! And getting into real estate ... that's smart. Oh, that's smaaaaart. I told him all along. When he had that shmooze with Elijah and Moses, and he turned all sparkly, I told him then. Build three tabernacles here ... Okay, just one. At least put up a plaque, "Jesus transfigured here, June eleventh, 0-0-27." But, no. "Don't tell anybody," he says.

So, what are you pulling down? 40-50 big ones? You know what I got? Lunch, I got. On a good day, maybe breakfast. I'm not complaining. I was in on the ground floor - that counts for something. I got statues all over the place. None of 'em look like but, but, hey, the headquarters in Rome? St. Peters! That still seems a little weird to me. St. Rock. Who would do that to a friend? "Simon," I says, "what's wrong with Simon?"

"Give up your stuff and follow me," he says.

I brought this nice young kid in to see him once. Very well connected. Good family; the Dad's really big in olive oil. And the kid wants to join. I'm thinking, this could be good. So, Jesus asks him the big one, you know, what's the most important commandment? And the kid spouts it right off, not a hitch. Okay, so I prompted him a little going into the interview, but the kid's sincere. And Jesus loves him, you can tell. He's a good looking kid, well behaved, nice clothes. But, then Jesus says, "You want to go with me, you gotta get rid of all your stuff first. Give it away to folks who don't have any stuff, then come back and see me." I couldn't believe my ears. So we lost him.

I said, "Jesus, this kid was loaded. You just blew a potentially large investor." And then he goes on at me about how tough it is to get to heaven if you've got a lot of stuff, and something about camels going through needles, and I don't know.

Anyway, I'm glad to see that's changed. I mean, this looks like a pretty well heeled bunch here. What's the weekly take? Pretty good, I bet. Oh, you got a good thing going here.

One night the boys and I, we're sitting around a campfire with Jesus singing "Michael, Row Your Boat Ashore," "We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder," some of the oldies but goodies, and then Jesus starts talking about he has to go to Jerusalem and the Son of Man is going to have all sorts of bad things happen to him, and we're not understanding what he's saying, so a few of us start trying to work out an organizational chart. You know, Jesus is the CEO, that's a given. But, who's the V.P.s? I mean, you can't have any kind of operation like that without flow charts. You got to have your P.R. section. Quality Control, and so forth. Well, Jesus just threw a fit and says, "You want to be Vice President, you've got to be the custodian. You want to lead, you've got to serve!" He was always saying things like that. "You gotta die to live. The first are last and the last first." I kept saying, "Jesus, you're going to drive 'em away with that sort of stuff. You need upbeat, upbeat! 'It's the real thing!' - take a tip from the Coke folks, Nike, whoosh! The Pillsbury Doughboy."

But, don't let me interrupt. You guys are doing great, just great! It's a real pleasure. I'll just sit down here, zip the lip. *You were saying?*

(Mr. Rhem)

I was saying, Peter, you never got the message. In the paragraph following our reading, we have Jesus speaking to the disciples about denying themselves, taking up the cross and following Jesus.

Those who want to save their life will lose it, Jesus warns. Those who lose their life for Jesus' sake - that is, for the sake of the way of Jesus will find life.

But, that word has too often been muffled in the history of the church.

It just may be that what appeared to be the triumph of the Christian religion and its institutional form, the church, was its undoing. In the year 312 C.E., the Roman Emperor Constantine was victorious in battle and he attributed his victory to Jesus Christ. Constantine decreed that Christianity would be the established religion of the Empire. Thus, the movement that sprang from Jesus, beginning as a Jewish sect, becoming a persecuted minority evolved into the state religion of the Roman Empire and Jesus, the destabilizer of the religious institution of Judaism, was co-opted by the Roman Emperor to bring unity and cohesion to the Empire.

It is no coincidence that the Constantinian decree of 313 was followed in 325 C.E. by the Council of Nicaea, perhaps the most critical Council in terms of the definition of the deity of Jesus and his relationship to God in the Trinitarian formula. John Dominic Crossan, in his *Jesus, A Revolutionary Biography*, writes,

... Constantine, wanting a unified Christianity as the empire's new religion, ordered the Christian bishops to meet, under imperial subsidy, in Nicaea, southeast of Constantinople, and there erase any major theological disagreements between them. Even if one is not already somewhat disturbed at imperial convocations, presence, and participation, it is hard not to become very nervous in reading this description of the imperial banquet celebrating the Council of Nicaea's conclusion, from Eusebius' *Life of Constantine*, 3.15:

Detachments of the bodyguard and troops surrounded the entrance of the palace with drawn swords, and through the midst of them the men of God proceeded without fear into the innermost of the Imperial apartments, in which some were the Emperor's companions at table, while others reclined on couches arranged on either side. One might have thought that a picture of Christ's kingdom was thus shadowed forth, and a dream rather than reality. (p. 201)

Crossan comments, "Dream or reality? Dream or nightmare?"

There are many serious students of the history of the church who see the Constantinian establishment not as the church's triumph, but rather, as the critical moment it lost its soul. The collusion of throne and altar, the mating of secular power and religion is always finally fatal to religion; it becomes a tool of the state or, when in the ascendancy, wields power as ruthlessly as any secular government.

I am always struck by the passage in Mark's Gospel where Jesus mentions his forthcoming death, and James and John come to him to request positions of power when he enters into his glory. Let us sit on your right and left hand, they ask. It is in response to this that Jesus tells them that greatness lies in servanthood.

Obviously, from the beginning the religion that evolved from Jesus - Christianity - has lived with the temptation to save its life, preserve its life, enhance its life. Surveying its history, one must recognize great fruits that have derived from Christian faith, from the church. It has, indeed, shaped our Western civilization, combining as it has the heritage of Athens and Jerusalem. But it has been, as well, the enemy of the one whose name it claims. Were I to cite its greatest failings, I would point to its triumphalism of attitude, coercion of method, exclusiveness of spirit.

Triumphalism is arrogance. We are first. It is one thing when expressed by the Marine Corps. It is unbecoming when expressed with nationalist zeal. But, it is downright betrayal when manifested by a religious tradition, especially a tradition that looks to Jesus, the crucified one, as its founder.

And triumphalism soon leads to tactics of coercion. No longer do we simply witness to what we have experienced, but we use power to enforce our views and policy. Throughout its history, when the church has been in a power position, it has forced its way, leveling the opposition, the Inquisition of the 15th century only the most glaring example.

And such coercion is justified by the claim of exclusiveness - the claim that truth is finally captured in the church's creeds and that there is truth and salvific grace alone through the channel of the church.

But it is not working anymore; the church has lost its position of dominance in the West. We speak of Europe as post-Christian and, appearance to the contrary, the church as institution is not a vital, confident body going from strength to strength. Multitudes are saying, "The Church: Who Needs It!"

But, there are astute observers who are deeply committed to the Christian faith who see the dis-establishment of the church as a blessing. We are now, they say, in the same situation as the Jewish folk following Jerusalem's destruction. We are

in a diaspora situation. Douglas John Hall writes in *Confessing the Faith*, citing the great Catholic thinker, Karl Rahner,

... we "must" accommodate ourselves to the diaspora situation, and this "must" emanates not only from our actual, empirical condition, but from the same gracious sovereignty that is contained in the journey of Jesus toward the cross. But we must and may do this *joyfully*. (p. 221)

To do so, we must cease striving for "total victory." But, says Rahner, this is not resignation and defeatism.

... If we once have the courage to give up our defense of the old facades which have nothing or very little behind them; if we cease to maintain, in public, the pretense of a universal Christendom; if we stop straining every nerve to get *everybody* baptized, to get *everybody* married in church and onto our registers ... if, by letting all of this go, we visibly relieve Christianity of the burdensome impression that it accepts responsibility for everything that goes on under this Christian top dressing, the impression that Christianity is ... a sort of Everyman's Religious Varnish, a folk-religion ... *then* we can be free for real missionary adventure and apostolic self-confidence. (p. 222)

Douglas Hall, Karl Rahner, Hans Küng - and many more of the most acute thinkers in the church see our present situation as holding great promise. As a minority without cultural assent or political power, we are free to get back to the way of Jesus, the way of the cross, of loving service and gracious embrace.

In the word of the apostle, we may yet grow up into the likeness of Jesus and speaking the truth in love become the true servant people as Jesus envisioned.

The Church: Who Needs It! as a coercive institution seeking power.

But, the church as community, a community of worship, of nurture, of gracious servant serving the world in Jesus' name - that is the church I need, for which I will live and, if need be, die.

Reference:

Douglas John Hall. *Confessing the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context*, Vol. 1. Fortress Press, 1991.