

5/20/12 (Reason for God #5) **The Church is Responsible for So Much Injustice**

A 19th century industrial baron once told Mark Twain, "Before I die I mean to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I will climb to the top of Mt. Sinai and read the Ten Commandments aloud." Twain said to the man, "I have a better idea. Why don't you stay right at home in New York and keep them?"

That little exchange demonstrates a problem that has plagued the Christian church throughout its history. The inability to match our walk with our talk. It's something that the non-Christian immediately notices and has used over the years as an objection to believing in God.

Atheist Ken Shei puts it this way: "Christianity has (by certain people) been used throughout history as an excuse for some of the most brutal, heartless, and senseless atrocities known to man. The historical examples are not difficult to recall: the Crusades; the Inquisitions; the witch-burnings; the Holocaust...I did not see much in Christianity that I considered to be worth the having." Or again, Richard Dawkins in his book "The God Delusion", quotes Blaise Pascal:

Slide: "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction."

How do we respond to a comment like that? What happens when the church is responsible for injustice? And by the way, it has been. We can't deny that. There have been numerous times when the church has lost its way. So why is that? The message today is my attempt to answer that challenge. I gave you an outline today in your bulletins and even give you a chance to fill in the blanks. And the first thing we need to recognize is that:

Slide: I. Church MEMBER ≠ Disciple of Christ.

Here we need to make the distinction between the "Visible" church and the "Invisible" church. The "Visible" church is made up of all the people whose names are on the computers of Christian churches as being members.

Slide: Visible/Invisible Church 'toon

Hopefully they also are at least occasionally in the church building. Now folks, being on the church computer does not make you a true Christian any more than being in the Elk's club makes you an elk, or being in the Lion's club makes you a Lion. Only true faith in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior from sin makes you a true disciple of Jesus. In that sense, despite all the different denominations of Christianity, there is only one Christian church. It's made up of all the true believers in Jesus. We call it "The Invisible Church" because you can't look into somebody else's heart to know whether or not they truly believe in Jesus as their Lord. The true Christian church isn't seen by looking at church buildings and stained glass, or by names on the computer. It's seen in true Christian people living out their Christian faith in love and service to God and their fellow man. And there is a great deal of that happening all the time all around us. Unfortunately however, what the non-Christian world chooses to focus on instead, are people with the name of Christian, acting in extremely unChristian ways.

For instance, we've mentioned Hitler at different times throughout this series. Hitler actually tried to present his movement as being Christian. For instance in Mein Kampf he said:

Slide: "I believe that I am acting in accordance with the will of the Almighty Creator: *by defending myself against the Jew, I am fighting for the work of the Lord.*"

And he made a number of other statements, trying to get the Christians to believe he was a Christian, but obviously, he did not believe in Jesus Christ as his Lord. In fact believed the

opposite, that there was no God and we are all just products of evolution. And those were the beliefs that directed his actions. He said:

Slide: “Thus there results the subjection of a number of people under the will, often of only a few persons, a subjection based simply upon the right of the stronger, a right which, as we see in Nature, can be regarded as the sole conceivable right, because it is founded on reason.”

“Survival of the fittest... the law of tooth and claw...” Hitler was what we would call a true Hypocrite, “a person who pretends to be what he is not.”

And of course, it shouldn't even need to be said that

Slide: A. HYPOCRITES are Not True Representatives of Jesus Christ.

We only have to look to Jesus Himself to see that. If there was one thing that made Him angry, it was hypocrisy in the people who were leading the church of God. Here's just one exchange that Jesus had with the leaders of the church of his day:

Slide: “But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, “You **hypocrites**, why are you trying to trap me?” (Matthew 22:18 NIV)

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you **hypocrites!** You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.” (Matthew 23:13 NIV)

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you **hypocrites!** You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are.” (Matthew 23:15 NIV)

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you **hypocrites!** You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.” (Matthew 23:23 NIV)

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you **hypocrites!** You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.” (Matthew 23:25 NIV)

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you **hypocrites!** You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean.” (Matthew 23:27 NIV)

Do you get the point? Jesus was not satisfied with hypocrisy in His church. And we shouldn't be either. 1500 years later Martin Luther basically said the same thing to the leaders of the church of his day, for whom “religion” had become about power and control instead of grace and forgiveness. So he challenged the church to be reformed back to the word of God. And every generation must call for that kind of reform. Because the fact is that...

Slide: B. The Christian Church has not always followed the TEACHINGS of Christ.

Some of the examples were given earlier in the quote by atheist Ken Schei. For instance, “The Inquisition” was a deliberate policy of the Roman Catholic Church to discover evidence of heresy against church teachings and to persecute and kill heretics when they were found. Nothing can justify that and those folks certainly were not following the teachings of Jesus, who said:

Slide: 27 “But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” (Luke 6:27–28 NIV)

I don't see anything in there about persecuting and killing your enemies, do you?

Of course the Crusades are almost always used as an example of Christian injustice.

Slide: Crusade pic

Completely unpacking that whole thing and separating the religious from the political would take more time than we have here. And really, there's no need. The fact is that whatever the outward circumstances, the Christian church of that day was not following the teachings of Christ.

The same must be said for instance of individuals like Pastor Fred Phelps and his Westboro Baptist Church – the group that protests at the funerals of our service men and women and wave hate-filled signs.

Slide: Westboro Baptist signs

The fact is that there has been, and continues to be, hypocrisy and evil in the Christian Church, just as there is in other organizations. And we need to just admit it. But the point is: that's what it is. When Christian people act that way they are acting **against** their faith, not as a result of it. You cannot use those examples to say anything against the decision to follow Jesus Christ as the Lord of your life. What we do have to admit though is that a...

Slide: II. Disciple of Christ ≠ PERFECT Person.

I use that term “**disciple**” today deliberately, because a disciple is one who learns. So a follower of Jesus Christ is always learning more about Him and how to live for Him – but he never learns it all. The Apostle Paul, in my mind was one of the greatest disciples of Christ who has ever lived. He traveled all over the Roman Empire teaching people about the love of Jesus. As a result, he was scourged with the 39 lashes 5 times. His back must have just been a mass of scars. Three times he was beaten with rods. Once he was stoned and left for dead. Three times he was shipwrecked on missionary journeys. He faced constant persecution and was finally put to death because he would stop proclaiming that Jesus Christ had died to take away your sins and risen victoriously from the dead, to live and reign forevermore. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul wrote most of the New Testament that has changed the lives of countless millions of people over the last 2000 years. He was, I am sure, one of the most outwardly righteous people that has ever walked the face of this earth. Yet when it came to describing the living out of his Christian faith, he was not ashamed to be brutally honest: “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature,” he said.

Now folks, read these words with me and see if you have not had these same feelings at some point in your walk with God:

Slide: “18 I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. 19 For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. 20 Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

21 So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. 22 For in my inner being I delight in God's law; 23 but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. 24 What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:18-24 NIV)

Wow! That's kind of a downer message isn't it? That's what we call the LAW message.

When we compare ourselves with God's perfect standard we see our sin and our failure to live the way God wants us to live. But folks, I am so glad that Paul didn't end his train of thought with that verse. He went on and said:

Slide: 25 “Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:18–25 NIV)

That’s where our rescue comes from. That’s where our forgiveness comes from. Paul also said these precious words:

Slide: “1 Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, 2 because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.”

(Romans 8:1–2 NIV)

Martin Luther put it this way:

Slide: A. We are at the same time SINNER and SAINT.

Through faith in Jesus Christ we receive the forgiveness of sins He won for us on the cross. Therefore we are not condemned... In fact, the Bible calls us saints, a chosen priesthood, a holy nation. But because we are by nature sinful, despite our best efforts to live a godly life, sometimes that sin comes out. We can’t use that to **excuse** sinful behavior, but it helps to **understand** it – especially as we deal with this as an objection to the faith.

In addition...

Slide: B. We understand and learn God’s Word IMPERFECTLY.

For instance, as you examine the history of the Christian Church, it spread like wildfire despite the persecutions of Christians under Nero and other Roman emperors. But then something happened that changed the whole dynamic. The Roman Emperor Constantine became a Christian and began to marry the Church to the State. Christianity was not only tolerated, it came to be the state religion. Eventually the church came to be used politically and the Word of church leaders was often given the same status as the Word of God, which is bound to lead to misunderstandings, and it did.

We could go on and document other historic abuses of the Christian Church that followed, but I hope it’s become obvious to you by now, these things are never done as a result of **following** the teachings of Christ, but always **against** the faith. In contrast, if you want to talk about a philosophy that has caused oppression and violence, look no farther than atheism and evolution. Evangelist Luis Palau puts it this way:

Slide: “The seismic shock of out-and-out atheism sent tidal waves across Europe and beyond, accounting directly for the annihilation and butchering of more than one hundred million people this past century alone. Humanity has paid a steep, gruesome price for the awful experiments in deliberate antitheism carried out by Lenin, Hitler, Stalin, Mao Tse-tung and others – each of whom was profoundly influenced by the writings of the apostles of atheism...After watching atheism proliferate...it’s clearer than ever that...without God, we’re lost.” – Luis Palau

I agree. But the good news is: we’re not without God. Jesus promised He would be with us always – even to the end of the age. He also promised that no matter how dark our world gets, He will always preserve His church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. The fact is that:

Slide: III. True Disciples of Christ + the Holy Spirit = PEACE on earth, goodwill to men.

...just as the angel proclaimed at the coming of Christ into the world.

Folks, it’s true the representatives of Christ don’t always represent Him well – us included.

The Bible says:

Slide: “3 At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.” (Titus 3:3 NIV)

Not a pretty picture... But the good news is:

Slide: 4 But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, 6 whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.” (Titus 3:3–7 NIV)

Folks, without the presence of the Holy Spirit working in the lives of God’s people, this world and our living in it would be a permanent nightmare. But the Holy Spirit is present, dwelling in all who believe in Jesus – changing us, and changing this world for the better. We should never cover up for the abuses of the Christian church, but we should also never forget the great good it has brought to the world. For instance,

Slide: A. Christ gives DIGNITY to all people.

Michael Novak has written: “Both Aristotle and Plato held that most humans are by nature slavish and suitable only for slavery, that most do not have natures worthy of freedom. The Greeks used ‘dignity’ for only the few, rather than for all human beings. By contrast, Christianity insisted that every single human is loved by the Creator, made in the Creator’s image, and destined for eternal friendship and communion with Him.” The Apostle Paul put it this way:

Slide: “26 You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, 27 for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:26–28 NIV)

It’s that kind of acceptance and love that sustains us and it’s...

Slide: B. The love of Christ motivates His disciples to REPENT.

To admit when we do wrong and resolve to change. Folks, there is very little in life that is worse than carrying around the guilt of sin. Our society is trying to tell you that there is no such thing as sin, and so that leaves us to try to justify behavior that we know inside is wrong. And therefore if your guilt is not dealt with, it festers and comes out as depression and anger and bitterness. Folks, God gave you a conscience for a reason. Not to torment you, but to drive you to become honest with yourself and with God and confess to Him when you’ve blown it. To repent means to be truly sorry for what you’ve done and to resolve to change. And the wonder and Grace of God is that when you take that step, He has open arms to welcome you home. Jesus Christ loved you so much that He shed His blood and died to take those sins away. Whatever it is you’re holding onto and beating yourself up about, come clean with God. Repent, let it go to the cross and walk away from here today forgiven and freed to live a different life. And the love and forgiveness of Christ motivates us to do that...

Slide: C. The love of Christ motivates His disciples to LOVE and SERVE God and others.

It’s the Christian Church. It’s your church, that has helped the poor, fed the hungry, clothed the naked, built the hospitals, healed the sick, visited those in prison, provided homes for the homeless, parents for the fatherless, counseling for the troubled at heart. All because the love

of Christ compels us and the Holy Spirit fills us. Now imagine losing all of it. Imagine all of it going away. That is not the world we want to leave to our children.

Folks, the Christian Church is not perfect – because you are not perfect and I am not perfect. But like the ark, it's the best thing afloat. Join hands with Christ as His disciple. Get on the boat ... and resolve to make it better. Amen.