

“I’ve Got Issues: ‘The Church is responsible for so much evil and injustice’”

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Isaiah 58:1-7, Matthew 7:21-23, Mark 10:42-45

The past few weeks we have been exploring some of the major objections that people raise with regard to Christianity. These objections often come up in conversations with family members and friends and neighbors, and it behooves us, therefore, to be able to talk intelligently about our faith.

In this series of messages, we have been delving into an area of theology called “apologetics.” By “apologetics” I do not mean giving an “apology” for our faith in the sense of having to say we are sorry for what we believe. No, just the opposite: an “apology” is a spirited defense of Christian faith. You and I should be able to defend our faith when called upon in a reasonable and intelligent way, with conviction and sensitivity. As the Apostle Peter challenges us, you and I ought to be able *“to give a reason for the hope that is within us.”* That presupposes that we really know what we believe... hopefully our exploration of these issues is adding to our bank of Christian knowledge.

This morning we come to a legitimate issue that is often raised by skeptics: *“The Christian church has been responsible for so much evil and injustice in the world. Why should I want to become a Christian?”*

Sadly, it is true: Church history is littered with examples of violence and oppression. It is not a pretty picture. It’s very easy to enumerate the sins of the Church.

The Crusades immediately come to mind. There were four of them, if you remember. For over two centuries European Christians tried to expel the Muslims from the Holy Land. During the First Crusade, upon entering Jerusalem, Christian knights proceeded to engage in the wholesale slaughter of men, women, and children; they were up to their knees and their bridle reins in blood (all the while bearing the sign of the cross on their shields). During the Fourth Crusade, the Crusaders entered the Byzantine Christian city of Constantinople (present day Istanbul) and murdered fellow Christians, sacking the churches, and raping and pillaging. Here were Western Christians killing Eastern Christians. Still today, one major obstacle to sharing the Christian faith with Turks and others in the Middle East is the memory of the Crusades. To Muslims, it happened just yesterday and they still hold it against us.

And then, of course, there is the Inquisition. The inquisition began in 1163 when Pope Alexander III instructed bishops to discover evidence of heresy and take actions against heretics. What developed was a campaign of terror, lack of due process, and torture to exact confessions and recantations. Those who refused to repent and recant were burned at the stake. There were subsequent waves of the Inquisition in the centuries that followed. This too, is a terrible blight on Christian history. Sad to say, John Calvin, the forefather of Presbyterianism, had much to do with burning of a heretic in Geneva by the name of Michael Servetus. The Protestants and the Anglican had their own versions of the Inquisition.

Add to the Crusades and the Inquisition all the religious wars that took place in Europe. The Thirty Years War between Catholics and Protestants decimated the population of the continent and ravaged the countryside.

Without a doubt, one of the ugliest blights on Christian history is anti-Semitism – a rather ironic circumstance since Jesus himself was a Jew, his first followers were Jews, and Jews wrote the entire New Testament except for Luke and Acts. It's a long and shameful story. Jews were long mistreated and discriminated against by the Christian Church. Martin Luther himself, the initiator of the Protestant Reformation, said some terrible things about Jews in his later years, and Lutherans are the first to repudiate his views.

We could go on and on – Christian history is replete with these kinds of horrors and atrocities. All kinds of evil have been done in Jesus' name.

In my opinion, the problem began for Christianity when the Church tied itself to worldly power. You see, in its earliest days, Christianity was a movement that stayed pretty true to the teachings of the Lord. The earliest Church was not perfect by any means, but they cared for the poor and the outcast. They spread the gospel of love. They were concerned to give themselves away in service. They met in homes and were very community minded. They were peace-loving and remained model citizens. Christian faith appealed to the ordinary person and to the down and out and it spread like wildfire through the Roman Empire, despite periods of persecution.

But then early in the 4th century the Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the empire and church and state became allied. The Church took pleasure in its special, established status and quickly patterned itself after the state, establishing its own political machinery, adopting laws, building basilicas, demanding adherence. The church gave divine legitimacy to the state, and the state protected the Church and enforced its decrees. The Church was no longer a movement, but an institution concerned with the exercise of power and self-preservation. The Church was inevitably corrupted by that power. That led to many abuses - the suppression of heretics, and the exploitation of people in various ways.

This is very different from what Jesus had in mind for the Church, for he himself forsook power and went the way of the cross. He said to Pilate that his kingdom was not of this world. He told Peter to put down his sword; it wasn't his way. He once said to his disciples:

“You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.⁴³ But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant,⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.⁴⁵ For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” [Mark 10:42-45]

The Church has been its worst when it copied not Christ who came to serve, but rather the “rulers of the Gentiles” who loved to lord it over people and dominate and exploit them. The Church has given in to that tendency time and time again throughout history.

And you know what? We shouldn't be surprised, for the Church is composed of human beings, and human beings are sinners. The church may have been founded by Jesus himself, but it can still be all too human. Anyone who is involved in a Christian church is aware that the people of the church have character flaws and constantly fail to live up to the high standards they outwardly profess. So we shouldn't be surprised when the Church reflects very poorly on Christ. When Christians take their eyes off the Head of the Church who is Christ, and fail to heed his teachings - when they ignore the promptings and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit - they inevitably give in to the passions of the sinful nature, producing the poison fruit of selfish pride, greed, covetousness, envy, bitterness and so on . . . And that presents a very poor witness to the world indeed.

Speaking of poor witness, I think of the great Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi. A Hindu, Gandhi nevertheless admired Jesus and often quoted from the Sermon on the Mount. Once when the missionary E. Stanley Jones met with Gandhi he asked him, *"Mr. Gandhi, though you quote the words of Christ often, why is that you appear to so adamantly reject becoming his follower?"*

Gandhi replied, *"Oh, I don't reject your Christ. I love your Christ. It's just that so many of you Christians are so unlike your Christ."*

Apparently Gandhi's rejection of Christianity grew out of an incident that happened when he was a young man practicing law in South Africa. He had become attracted to the Christian faith, had studied the Bible and the teachings of Jesus, and was seriously exploring becoming a Christian. And so he decided to attend a church service. As he came up the steps of the large church where he intended to go, a white South African elder of the church barred his way at the door. *"Where do you think you're going, kaffir?"* the man asked Gandhi in a belligerent tone of voice.

Gandhi replied, *"I'd like to attend worship here."*

The church elder snarled at him, *"There's no room for kaffirs in this church. Get out of here or I'll have my assistants throw you down the steps."*

From that moment, Gandhi said, he decided to adopt what good he found in Christianity, but would never again consider becoming a Christian if it meant being part of the church.

And therein is the problem: the problem is not with the founder of the Christian church, Jesus Christ. The problem is not with his teachings, which even many nonbelievers admit are good, and wise and noble. The problem is with his followers. The problem is hypocrisy in the church, where Christians say one thing and do another. In short, the problem is with you and me when we forget who we are and whose we are, and by our attitudes and actions bring dishonor to the name of Christ.

The Lord is grieved and angered by the evil things people do in his name. It only proves that many of these folks never knew him in the first place. Jesus warned:

²¹ "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. ²² On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of

power in your name?’²³ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.’¹

The prophet Isaiah speaks the word of the Lord against those who call upon the name of the Lord and are outwardly pious, committed to religious observances, but who actually live in rebellion, ignoring his commands to care for the poor and the outcast, and who instead exploit others and commit one injustice after another:

- 58** Shout out, do not hold back!
 Lift up your voice like a trumpet!
 Announce to my people their rebellion,
 to the house of Jacob their sins.
- ² Yet day after day they seek me
 and delight to know my ways,
 as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness
 and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;
 they ask of me righteous judgments,
 they delight to draw near to God.
- ³ “Why do we fast, but you do not see?
 Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”
 Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
 and oppress all your workers.
- ⁴ Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
 and to strike with a wicked fist.
 Such fasting as you do today
 will not make your voice heard on high.
- ⁵ Is such the fast that I choose,
 a day to humble oneself?
 Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
 and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
 Will you call this a fast,
 a day acceptable to the LORD?
- ⁶ Is not this the fast that I choose:
 to loose the bonds of injustice,
 to undo the thongs of the yoke,
 to let the oppressed go free,
 and to break every yoke?
- ⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
 and bring the homeless poor into your house;
 when you see the naked, to cover them,
 and not to hide yourself from your own kin?²

¹ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

² *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

Powerful words! You and I who bear his name, and the Christian church, which is to be his body in the world, have a sacred reputation to uphold. We are here not to lord it over others, not to exploit or oppress others, but to love and serve them. We are here to uphold standard of justice and righteousness, to care for the needy and to call people to faith and to a life of love and joy. The Christian Church is at its best when it does those things. What sort of witness are we giving to the world? Are we contributing to the world's store of evil and injustice? Are we a curse – or a blessing?

To those who point out the terrible record of the Church in history, all we can do is agree with them. We can't simply ignore these things or sweep them under the rug. Quite frankly, they need to be acknowledged, roundly criticized, mourned over and confessed. To be sure, some of the greatest critics of the Christian church have been Christians themselves. The terrible things the Church has done in history should make us heartsick.

However, and this must be said again: the evil and injustice committed by the Christian Church does not have its inspiration in Jesus Christ, nor is it the consequence of his teaching. The problem is with Christians who are not following Christ. The problem is with nominal Christians: Christians in name only. All you and I can do as individuals and as a church is to keep our eyes on the Head of the Church – on Christ - with a view to obedience in loving service. For only as we actually obey his will and live by his teachings can we be a blessing to others. The good thing is that the Lord has not given up on the Church or on you and me, in spite of our flaws and terrible failures. The Lord still has plans for us - but we must repent and truly follow.

There are a couple of things I must say, however, before I close. While it is easy to point out the sins of the Christian Church in history, we state for the record that incredible evil has been done by those who have not been believers at all. The atheistic record in human affairs is not exactly stellar. Atheist regimes have trampled human rights and have cost millions of lives. You have only to look at the regimes of Lenin, Hitler, Stalin, and Mao-tse Tung – atheists all. The problem is not with religion per se. The problem is the evil in human beings. And that is the very problem Jesus Christ came to address.

And secondly, it must be said that on balance the Christian church has been far more a blessing than a curse. Critics of Christianity love to point out all the bad things the Church has done, but fail to consider all the good gifts Christianity has given the world. Christianity gave to the world the idea of the dignity and worth of every human being. Down through the ages Christians have established hospitals, schools homeless shelters, orphanages, and various relief organizations. Christians have fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and cared for the sick and the dying. Christianity elevated the status of women and children. It was Christian activists who led the effort for the abolition of slavery. Think of all the contributions Christians have made in the fields of literature, music, architecture, science and art down through the centuries. Without Christ and Christianity, the world would be a far less humane and far less livable.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, let us uphold the honor of his name by living for him and not for ourselves. Let us seek to live as true Christians – not as Christians in name only. Let us be true to the spirit of the One who gave his life for us and left a wonderful model of loving service. In so doing, we shall be a positive witness and a real blessing to others. So may it be! Amen.