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Reformation
& **REVIVAL**
JOURNAL

CHRISTIAN
ONENESS

A Quarterly for Church Leadership

VOLUME 13 · NUMBER 1 · WINTER 2004

*Keeping with the Church
While Keeping with God*



Travis Tamerius

I got indigestion today listening to a radio program just before suppertime. Our local radio station interviewed Martin Zender, author of *Quitting the Church Without Quitting God*. The author, a professing Christian, suggested to the listening audience that one should freelance his or her faith. Believe in God, but don't believe in the Church. Realize that God transcends the boundaries of the Church and her dogmas. He pointed to all of the problems and contradictions with organized religion, her structures and leaders. He made the statement that Jesus wouldn't join any of the churches, which today bare his name.

Zender went public with what many think privately. Just give me Jesus. Who needs the Church? I can worship God in my johnboat on Sunday morning. He can "walk with me and talk with me" while I'm chasing golf balls down the fairway.

It is easy to think that way. It is easy to believe in a transcendent God whose glory fills the earth. It is much harder to believe that any of the glory ever finds its way into the Church. It is easy to believe in Jesus as your *personal* Lord and Savior, much harder to believe that other Christians have anything to do with your personal relationship with Jesus. It is easy to believe in a universal, invisible catholic Church. Much harder to believe in the local, visible church one actually

attends on the corner of Main and Broadway.

Dogging the Church is easy enough to do. After all, the Church is not what it should be. People sing out of tune, the sermon is not as impressive as *Meet the Press*, the man next to me is a bore, the woman in front of me is a crank. Why not quit the Church?

Those of us who minister in the Church have similar thoughts, monthly paychecks notwithstanding. At about the time that the same man in the same pew knocks off at the same place in each week's sermon, we wonder whether or not Jesus really did intend the Church. Shortly after we get two factions fighting over the biblical approach to breastfeeding children we're pretty confident he didn't.

Even though such thoughts are easy to come by, they are nonetheless adolescent. The Christian life is not a spiritual Woodstock, an exercise in free love and a baptized narcissism. The way of Jesus is neither Zen Buddhism nor Zender Christianity. The hippie that says, "I love love but not my wife," or "I don't want love boxed in with vows and commitment to one person" is no model for the Christian.

When we love the Church invisible but not her embodied expression we are in love with an abstraction. We are guilty of the ancient heresy of Gnosticism, denigrating and escaping the material world where God has us in search of a more pure, spiritual world of ideas. The incarnation defies such an approach to the Church. The Word became flesh and blood and dwelt among us. The God who is big enough to fill all in all was also big enough to become small. God took on measurements and proportion, fit himself into the arms of a teenaged mother, grew up to share a meal with Judas and a laugh with Zacchaeus. God washed the feet of "high-maintenance" people and "projects."

Following the One who lives and loves like that would suggest that quitting the Church is sickness, not health. The good news, though, is that such a sickness has been successfully treated. Gnostics can recover. Sunday morning golfers can overcome their handicap. Here's a reading regimen that will kickstart the recovery: start by taking two passages from

the New Testament. Jesus tells us that the Church is something he has planned—"I will build my Church and the gates of hell will not prevail" (Matthew 16:18). The Apostle Paul describes the Church as the bride of Christ. "Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her in order that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of the water with the word, that he might present to himself the Church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing" (Ephesians 5:25-27).

Which of us would sit down with a happy husband and tell him that his bride leaves a lot to be desired? Which of us would flip through a photo album and inform a happy husband that his beloved was unshapely and unseemly? Which of us would tell Jesus that his bride is not much to write home about?

Add to those Scriptures some medicine from Church history. Cyprian (d. 258) says of the Church:

Therefore, he who would find Christ, must first of all find the Church. How would one know where Christ and his faith were, if one did not know where his believers are? And he who would know something of Christ, must not trust himself, or build his own bridges into heaven through his own reason; but he must go to the Church, visit and ask of the same for outside the Christian Church is no truth, no Christ, no salvation.

Get some nourishment from Martin Luther (1483-1546):

The Holy Christian Church is *the principal work of God*, for the sake of which all things were made. In the Church, great wonders daily occur, such as the forgiveness of sins, triumph over death, . . . the gift of righteousness and eternal life.

Finally, complete your recovery with a dose of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945):

There is a word that, when a Catholic hears it, kindles all his feeling of love and bliss; that stirs all the depths of his religious sensibility, from dread and awe of the Last Judgment to the sweetness of God's presence; and that certainly awakens in him

the feeling of home; the feeling that only a child has in relation to its mother, made up of gratitude, reverence, and devoted love. . . . And there is a word that to Protestants has the sound of something infinitely commonplace, more or less indifferent and superfluous, that does not make their heart beat faster; something with which a sense of boredom is so often associated. . . . And yet our fate is sealed, if we are unable again to attach a new, or perhaps a very old, meaning to it. Woe to us if that word does not become important to us soon again. . . . Yes, the word to which I am referring is Church.

May God help us keep with him by keeping with the Church!

Author

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We desire unity of religion but not when purchased at the cost of truth.

FULTON J. SHEEN

Whoever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality.

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

A house divided against itself cannot stand!

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

It is impossible to keep men together in one religious denomination, whether true or false, except they be united by means of visible signs or sacraments.

ST. AUGUSTINE

We find in the Spirit unity and plurality at the same time. There is plurality in that unity and unity in that plurality. There is no uniformity. It is the fullness of the Father, of the Son and of the Spirit.

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