

## **WHY SHOULD I BELIEVE WHEN THE CHURCH HAS MESSED UP? EPHESIANS 3:1-11, 4:11-16**

They've appeared at military funerals across the country, armed with signs reading "God Hates You" and "Thank God for Dead Soldiers." Members of the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas have outraged family members and communities alike with their antics. They say America's war casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan are God's wrath for tolerating homosexuality. About a year ago, leaders of the controversial church vowed to quadruple the number of protests at military funerals around the country following a Supreme Court ruling that the displays are protected under the First Amendment. "We are trying to warn you to flee the wrath of God, flee the wrath of destruction. What would be more kind than that," says fiery Margie Phelps, the lead legal counsel for the church and daughter of Pastor Fred Phelps. "We have not slowed down and we will not." Oh, joy.... Whenever I hear about so-called Christians doing this kind of thing – and on top of that, people who call themselves Baptists – I just shudder. I can't help but wonder how many people in our culture point to churches like Westboro Baptist Church as a reason why they want nothing to do with Christianity.

This Lenten season leading up to Holy Week, Good Friday and Easter Day we're considering seven objections to the Christian faith that we hear most often in our own culture. I'm calling this series of messages "Why Should I Believe? A Fresh Look At Old Doubts." The Bible calls us to be ready to explain to other people in a reasonable, gentle way why we believe what we believe. By the same token, even followers of Jesus can have the same doubts as non-Christians. To be more specific about today's subject, Christians have as many questions about the value of the church as non-Christians. Sometimes followers of Jesus can be as quick to write off and abandon the church as those who don't follow Jesus.

You're undoubtedly aware that many people take an intellectual stand against Christianity being true because of personal disappointment with Christians and churches. A couple of weeks ago I mentioned the late atheist Christopher Hitchens who, a few years ago, wrote a book entitled *God Is Not Great: Why Religion Poisons Everything*. He argued that all religions – not just Christianity – take racial and cultural differences and aggravate them until they boil over into war, violence and oppression of minorities. Religion has a way of turning cultural differences into cosmic battles between good and evil. Frankly, there is some truth historically to his claims. So, if the question is why should I believe that Christianity is true when the church has messed up, what's the answer? What might you say to a non-Christian friend? What might you say to yourself when you hear about yet another catastrophic, embarrassing failure by a Christian leader or by a local church? Here's one answer:

**THE CHURCH IS THE BEST AND WORST ARGUMENT FOR THE TRUTH OF CHRISTIANITY.**

Sheldon Vanauken, a Christian author, said: “The best argument for Christianity is Christians: their joy, their certainty, their completeness. But the strongest argument against Christianity is also Christians – when they are somber and joyless, when they are self-righteous and smug in complacent consecration, when they are narrow and repressive, then Christianity dies a thousand deaths.” He’s exactly right. A willingness to admit that sometimes Christians and churches can be Christianity’s worst enemy is just being honest.

Be willing to confess and admit the church’s failures. Jesus doesn’t ask you to defend what’s sinful or stupid. The church as a whole has some serious black marks in our history. There were the Crusades when Europeans Christians tried and failed to expel Muslims from the Holy Land from 1095 to 1291. War, violence and atrocities were committed in the name of Christ. There were also the Inquisitions in Europe where many were tortured and killed for being heretics. There were Christians who argued for and defended the practice of kidnapping, enslaving and transporting Africans to our country. Both Roman Catholic and Protestant crossed oceans to evangelize people who had never heard about Jesus. In some cases economic exploitation of those people and a destruction of native cultures definitely occurred. There have been words and acts of anti-Semitism by Christians and churches over the centuries. Most recently it was expressed in an unwillingness of some Christians to help Jews escape during the Nazi Holocaust. I remember when I was a kid hearing about Protestants and Catholics blowing each other up in Northern Ireland and wondering how that honored Jesus. All of these examples are shameful and completely indefensible.

Other examples are much more up to date. There’s been the shameful child abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic Church. Most non-Christians don’t distinguish between Catholics and Protestants. I’m pretty sure they paint all Christians with the same brush! This church has gone on record opposing abortion, the homosexual lifestyle and gay marriage and I personally agree with that 100%. But can you agree with me that sometimes Christians and churches can come across on those issues in the most hateful, belligerent and God-dishonoring ways? I believe when we do that we grieve the heart of Jesus and push people away from our faith needlessly. I’ve served in local churches long enough to admit that, yes, sometimes there are power hungry church leaders; and, yes, sometimes there are immoral preachers; and, yes, sometimes there are believers who cling to racism; and, yes, sometimes there are self-righteous, smug, hypocritical followers of Jesus sitting in the pews. All sadly true!

Our disunity as the Body of Christ is a black mark against us in our culture. And we Baptists are the worst! Did you know that there are some 25 distinct Baptist denominations in our country? And that’s not counting all the independent Baptist churches out there, which is kind of funny. Is there really any other kind? It just proves the old joke true: “Where there are two Baptists, there are three opinions!” After over thirty years in pastoral ministry, I can say a hearty “Amen!” to the observation that the church is like Noah’s ark. How’s that? Imagine that

scene with me. A big boat with lots and lots of animals. Can you imagine what it smelt like in there after three days? After three weeks? But the Bible says Noah, his family and all those animals were in there all shut up together for 40 days. How did they manage it? As bad as it was in the ark, it was a whole lot worse outside. Indeed, if it were not for the storm outside the ark, you couldn't have stood the stench inside it! Churches can be very messy, smelly places. Just admit it to your non-Christian friends. Confess it. Ask God to help us to repent.

But, secondly, it's also helpful to distinguish between cultural and biblical expectations of the church. What does that mean? For instance, the Bible never assumes that Christians or the church will be perfect. It assumes that the church is made up of spiritually immature, broken people who are very gradually becoming more like Jesus. To use an analogy, the church is like a hospital for sinners not a museum for perfect people. If you went to a hospital which claimed to heal sick people and found it full of sick people, would you conclude that it was a useless hospital? Of course not! You'd say it was serving the right people. Our culture might expect Christians to be perfect all the time. God knows better.

Then again, the Bible differentiates between cultural Christians and authentic Christians. Just to say you're a Christian or a member of a church doesn't necessarily make you a true follower of Jesus. The Old Testament prophets regularly denounced the tendency to participate in all kinds of worship services and religious observances but not have a true heart for God. Jesus was even more pointed when he said, "Not everyone who calls out to me, "Lord! Lord!" will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter. On judgment day many will say to me, "Lord! Lord! We prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and performed many miracles in your name." But I will reply, "I never knew you. Get away from me, you who break God's laws."'" (Mt 7:21-23 NLT) Does that mean sincere Christians have never done anything sinful or stupid? Of course not! Born-again followers of Jesus who know the Bible well and in whom the Holy Spirit lives often do (or don't do things) that dishonor the Lord. But, cultural, inauthentic Christianity at least explains some of the bad stuff that happens.

Here's a third thought to share with a non-Christian. What's needed is not less Christianity but more Christianity. Non-Christians sometimes condemn people who are Christian in name only, but don't really practice their faith and barely seem to believe it. But they also criticize people who they think are fanatics – people who seem to over-practice or over-believe Christianity. These might be Christians who are overly zealous in sharing their faith or who loudly disapprove of or condemn various groups with whom they disagree. But is that really the problem? Christians who seem fanatical are often people who haven't fully grasped that we are only ever accepted by God on the basis of sheer grace so they develop instead this kind of crusty, "in your face", judgmental attitude towards others. The solution is not to get Christians like that to kind of tone down and moderate their faith, but instead to grasp it more fully and truly. The problem

with Christians who have lots of attitude “in the name of Jesus”, is not having too much of Jesus, but instead not having enough of Jesus!

Here's a fourth thought to share with a non-Christian friend. The world is far better off for the church's existence. Sometimes we need to help people get a more balanced perspective on the church's mistakes and contributions. For instance, while some missionaries did indeed exploit native populations, many also served indigenous people selflessly and improved their lives through education, medical treatment and literacy. Much missionary work has actually resulted in the preservation of native cultures not their destruction. While some Christians were on the wrong side of the slavery issue, it's doubtful that curse would have ended without the efforts of a dynamic Christian politician named William Wilberforce. While some Christians were on the wrong side of the civil rights issue, it was other Christians who were at the forefront of insisting on the just treatment of all human beings. Many historians now point to the witness and efforts of the organized church in Eastern Europe as key to the overthrow of communism and Soviet domination and the discovery of political liberty.

By the same token, there is a long, noble history of Christian groups taking care of the poor and the disadvantaged. All over the world, there's a wonderful legacy of hospitals, homeless shelters, rehab programs, relief organizations, orphanages and efforts to feed the hungry. Add to that the undeniably positive influence and impact of Christianity's gifts to this world in the areas of literature, music, architecture, science, art and education. Perhaps most important from eternity's perspective are the nameless men and women who have humbly and courageously upheld the Christian faith, served in obscurity, given their lives to help others and left the world a far better place. Why should I believe that Christianity is true when the church has messed up? Here's a second answer:

### **THE CHURCH IS CENTRAL AND INDISPENSABLE TO GOD'S MISSION.**

First and foremost, Jesus loves the church. At least three verses in the Bible underline this truth. Jesus Himself said, “... ‘I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it.’” (Mt 16:18 NLT). That surely speaks to the personal commitment Jesus has to and for the church. In the books of Acts, the apostle Paul is exhorting a group of Christian leaders and he says, “So guard yourselves and God's people. Feed and shepherd God's flock—his church, purchased with his own blood—over which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as elders.” (Acts 20:28 NLT) That underlines the fact that Jesus shed his own blood for this entity we call the church. That's how precious and valuable the church is to Jesus. Paul is writing to the Christians in Ephesus about marriage, but embedded in that teaching is an important statement about Jesus and the church. “For husbands, this means love your wives, just as Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her.” (Eph 5:25 NLT) Jesus loves the church so much, He died for the church on the cross. The church has value simply because God created it and it's the object of Jesus' love. Don't ever try to

separate Jesus from the church and think, “Oh, I want Jesus and I like Jesus, but forget the church. I can be a good Christian and dump the church.” If you really love Jesus, you will love His church. If you really love Jesus, you cannot neglect His church, or hold it in contempt, or pretend you have no need of it.

Second, the church is God’s primary tool to redeem people. Let’s look at one of our scripture passages just now – Ephesians 4:11-16. Among other great truths in that passage is the very clear implication and assumption that it is primarily through the church that men, women, boys and girls come into a living relationship with Jesus, grow to spiritual maturity and come to know God in every important way. Martin Luther, the great Reformer, said, “Apart from the church, salvation is impossible.” It’s not that being a part of a church provides salvation; only God does that. But followers of Jesus can’t fulfill what it means to be a Christian apart from the church. Vital connection to a church becomes, then, an indispensable mark of being a child of God. True spiritual membership – not merely getting your name put down on a list of church members - is fundamental to a faithful Christian life. The church – manifested in thousands upon thousands of local congregations down through the centuries – takes up where the nation of Israel left off. God chose Israel to be a light to the rest of the world. For a period of time, it was through Israel that other people could find the true God. That changed after the cross and the empty tomb. The church now fills that role and responsibility. The church – and the local church in particular – is God’s primary tool to redeem individuals – one here, a family there, two here, three there. And when you respond to that personal call of Jesus to become His follower, you’re called out of your isolation, individualism and self-centeredness into the community of God’s forever family. The church is central to God’s mission.

Here’s a third and final thought for today. The church is God’s primary tool to reconcile the planet. There’s no doubt we live in a broken, busted up world on so many different levels. But God’s mission is to renew and recreate this planet back to its original design as a place fully submitted to Him and thus full of His love, His peace and His grace. That’s part of the truth that we hear in yet another scripture – Ephesians 3:1-11. I love how The Message renders v. 11 there: “Through followers of Jesus like yourselves gathered in churches, this extraordinary plan of God is becoming known and talked about even among the angels!” God isn’t going to accomplish His purposes through mystical, imaginary groups of people, but instead through local expressions of His universal family made up of real, live and deeply flawed people like us.

God has chosen KRBC along with other local congregations to minister and reach out in the love of Jesus to the Northland area and beyond. A local church is the place where the good news about Jesus is contained, so to speak, for the surrounding community. KRBC is the good news of Jesus embodied and fleshed out for the Northland community to see. This church – with all of its warts and blemishes – has a part in God’s great mission for the whole world and we get to be a part of it. What gets accomplished here in the lives of people is eternal,

everlasting and forever. Please remember that the next time you serve around here or you serve the community through this church. Eternal. Everlasting. Forever. Elton Trueblood, a great Christian leader and author, sums it up: "The hardest problem of Christianity is the problem of the church. We cannot live without it, and we cannot live with it.... However bad the church may be in practice, it is the necessary vehicle for Christ's penetration of the world...."

Tony Campolo is an exceptional Christian communicator and educator. He tells a remarkable story of something that happened in Hawaii where he was on a speaking engagement. He got really hungry very late one night and found a sleazy place down the street – an all night diner - that deserved the name "greasy spoon." Tony didn't even touch the menu – it was that bad. The fat guy behind the counter came over and asked Tony, "What d'ya want?" Tony got a cup of coffee and a donut. As he sat there munching on his donut and sipping his coffee at 3:30 in the morning, the door of the diner suddenly swung open and, to his discomfort, in marched eight or nine provocative and boisterous prostitutes. It was a small place, and they sat on either side of Tony. Their talk was loud and crude. Tony felt completely out of place and was just about to make his getaway.

But then he overheard the woman beside him say, "Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm going to be 39." Her friend responded in a nasty tone, "So what do you want from me? A birthday party? Ya want me to get you a cake and sing 'Happy Birthday'?" "Come on," said the woman sitting next to Tony. "Why do you have to be so mean? I was just telling you, that's all. Why do you have to put me down? I was just telling you it was my birthday. I don't want anything from you. I mean, why should you give me a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?"

When Tony heard that, he made a decision. He waited until the women had left. Then he called over the fat guy behind the counter, and asked him, "Do they come in here every night?" "Yeah!" he answered. "The one right next to me, does she come here every night?" "Yeah!" he said. "That's Agnes. Yeah, she comes in here every night. Why d'ya wanna know?" "I heard her say that tomorrow is her birthday. What do you say you and I do something about that? What do you think about us throwing a birthday party for her—right here—tomorrow night?"

A smile crossed his chubby cheeks, "That's great! I like it! That's a great idea!" Calling to his wife, who did the cooking in the back room, he shouted, "Hey! Come out here! This guy's got a great idea. Tomorrow's Agnes' birthday. This guy wants us to go in with him and throw a birthday party for her—right here—tomorrow night!" His wife came out of the back room all bright and smiley. She said, "That's wonderful! You know Agnes is one of those people who is really nice and kind, and nobody does anything nice and kind for her." Tony told them, "If it's okay with you, I'll get back here tomorrow morning about 2:30 and decorate

the place. I'll even get a birthday cake!" "No way," said Harry (that was his name, after all) the fat guy. "The birthday cake's my thing. I'll make the cake."

At 2:30 the next morning, Tony was back at the diner. He'd picked up some crepe-paper decorations at the store and had made a sign out of big pieces of cardboard that read, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" He decorated the diner from one end to the other. I had that diner looking good. By 3:15 every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. It was wall-to-wall prostitutes and Tony! At 3:30 on the dot, the door of the diner swung open, and in came Agnes and her friend. Everyone screamed, "Happy birthday!" Never had Tony seen a person so flabbergasted, so stunned and so shaken. Her mouth fell open. Her legs seemed to buckle a bit. Her friend grabbed her arm to steady her. As she was led to sit on one of the stools along the counter, everyone sang "Happy Birthday" to her. Agnes' eyes moistened. Then, when the birthday cake with all the candles on it was carried out, she lost it and just openly cried. Harry mumbled, "Blow out the candles, Agnes! Come on! Blow out the candles! If you don't blow out the candles, I'm gonna hafta blow out the candles." Then he handed her a knife and told her, "Cut the cake, Agnes. Yo, Agnes, we all want some cake."

Agnes looked down at the cake. Then without taking her eyes off it, she said, "Look, Harry, is it all right with you if I... I mean is it okay if I kind of... what I want to ask you is... is it O.K. if I keep the cake a little while? I mean, is it all right if we don't eat it right away?" Harry shrugged and answered, "Sure! It's O.K. If you want to keep the cake, keep the cake. Take it home, if you want to." "Can I?" Agnes asked. "I live just down the street a couple of doors. I want to take the cake home, okay? I'll be right back. Honest!" She got off the stool, picked up the cake, carried it with reverence, she walked slowly toward the door and left.

When the door closed, there was a stunned silence in the place. Not knowing what else to do, Tony broke the silence by saying, "What do you say we pray?" It just felt like the right thing to do. He prayed for Agnes. He prayed for her salvation. He prayed that her life would be changed and that God would be good to her. When he finished, Harry leaned over the counter and with a trace of hostility in his voice, said, "Hey! You never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?" In one of those moments when just the right words came, Tony answered, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for whores at 3:30 in the morning." Harry waited a moment and then almost sneered as he answered, "No, you don't. There's no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. I'd join a church like that!"

Wouldn't we all? Wouldn't we all like to be a part of a church that throws birthday parties for whores at 3:30 in the morning? Has the church always represented Jesus well? No, we haven't. But every now and then, we catch a glimpse of the kind of people Jesus has called us to be and we go out and do it. May we become and be that church for the glory of God!