

CHRISTIANITY GONE BAD

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Last week I began a series that I am calling LIVING AND TALKING WITH ATHEISTS. I decide to preach this sermon series because as I get more and more outside of my Christian Bubble → I am finding more and more people, particularly under the age of 50 who are not participants in the way of any religion, but are for all practical purposes atheists or agnostics.

In a study published in late 2009 CNN reported these findings:

America is a less Christian nation than it was 20 years ago, and Christianity is not losing out to other religions, but primarily to a rejection of religion altogether. . .

Seventy-five percent of Americans call themselves Christian, according to the American Religious Identification Survey from Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. In 1990, the figure was 86 percent.

there has been an increase in the number of people expressing no religious affiliation.

The survey also found that "born-again" or "evangelical" Christianity is on the rise, while the percentage who belong to "mainline" congregations . . . has fallen.

The rise in evangelical Christianity is contributing to the rejection of religion altogether by some Americans, said Mark Silk of Trinity College.

"In the 1990s, it really sunk in on the American public generally that there was a long-lasting 'religious right' connected to a political party, and that turned a lot of people the other way," he said of the link between the Republican Party and groups such as the Moral Majority and Focus on the Family.

"In an earlier time, people who would have been content to say, 'Well, I'm some kind of a Protestant,' now say 'Hell no, I won't go,'" he told CNN

Silk also said the revelation that some Catholic priests had sexually abused children -- and senior figures in the church hierarchy had helped to hide it -- drove some Catholics away from religion.

And, he said, it is now more socially acceptable than it once was to admit having no religion.

In the survey, one in five Americans said they have no religious identity or did not answer the question, and more than one in four said they do not expect to have a religious funeral.

And the truth is --- many of those who self identified as religious do not practice their faith.

A couple years ago, Jeff had encouraged me to read a book by Dan Kimball called: THEY LIKE JESUS BUT NOT THE CHURCH.

It was really an eye opener to the way a lot of young people look at the Church. It started with a quote from Bono the lead singer of the group U2 I will talk more about him later.

Bono is quoted as saying:

“Christians are hard to tolerate; I don’t know how Jesus does it.”

If you want to get some real insight into the challenges the church faces in the next decade, I would highly recommend his book. I don’t agree with all of his solutions, but I think his understanding of the problem is right on.

And that takes us back to Dawkins and Harris.

I share with you about them last week; they are both evangelical atheists who, in their books THE GOD DELUSION and LETTER TO A CHRISTIAN NATION argue that the world would be a better place without religion.

I hate to say this, but I hear that all the time.

Many people look at the problems in the world and believe that they are caused by religion.

Six years ago I preached a sermon series that I titled WHEN RELIGION BECOMES EVIL based on a book by Charles Kimball.

He states:

Religion is arguably the most powerful and pervasive force on earth. Throughout history religious ideas and commitments have inspired individuals and communities of faith to transcend narrow self-interest in pursuit of higher values and truths. The record of history shows that noble acts of love, self-sacrifice, and service to others are frequently rooted in deeply held religious worldviews. At the same time, history clearly shows that religion has often been linked directly to the worst examples of human behavior. It is somewhat trite, but nevertheless sadly true, to say that more wars have been waged, more people killed, and

these days more evil perpetrated in the name of religion than by any other institutional force in human history.

He is not talking about one particular branch of religion but is speaking in a very general way.

But we can easily identify some of the ways other religious traditions have done evil:

- The caste system in India
- Women in Islam
 - Forced to cover their entire bodies in garments (even on a beach)
 - Not allowed to have interaction with men who aren't their husbands

But before we get too self righteous → Christianity doesn't have such a good track record as well.

Two weeks ago I preached on how Southern Preachers justified the institution of slavery and used the bible to do so,

Jefferson Davis who would become the President of the Confederacy declared:
"[Slavery] was established by decree of Almighty God...it is sanctioned in the Bible, in both Testaments, from Genesis to Revelation...it has existed in all ages, has been found among the people of the highest civilization, and in nations of the highest proficiency in the arts"

Many others said similar things

"There is not one verse in the Bible inhibiting slavery, but many regulating it. It is not then, we conclude, immoral." Rev. Alexander Campbell

"The right of holding slaves is clearly established in the Holy Scriptures, both by precept and example." Rev. R. Furman, D.D., Baptist, of South Carolina

Religious abuse doesn't stop there

It wasn't until 1920 that women were given the right to vote.

And why were they not allowed to vote?

Because the Bible and the Church said that women were inferior and not capable of voting.

Even today, in many denominations women are not allowed to serve as Pastors or Priests. Many orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions still argue that God does not want women to serve.

In their minds the Bible is very clear.

1 Timothy 2:11-12 (NRSV)

Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent.

Not only are women excluded from the ranks as pastors, but often they are not allowed to serve in any leadership or teaching capacity if it requires them to have oversight of men.

People outside the church see that and lump us all together and think we are crazy!

But how would we do if we had a woman pastor?

Some of you would think it is great.

Others of you . . .

So not only does the outside world look at Christians and say – you talk about equality and love, but you don't practice it → but they also open up their newspapers or turn on the news and read the stories of abuse that take place.

Of course we are all familiar with the difficulties that the Roman Catholic Church has created with their poor response to the pedophile priests in their midst.

And while that issue has not been as pervasive in the protestant church, we have faced scandal after scandal of pastors involved in financial improprieties.

And too many of our clergy have sought to become celebrities and have taken advantage of gullible Christians.

There are Churches that proclaim that the wealth of their pastor is proof of God's blessing upon them.

And many believe → while many others on the outside say → why would I want anything to do with that?

One of the arguments that the new breed of atheists often proclaim is that: Religion is the cause of the bad things that people do

Certainly there is some truth to that, but at the same time, that statement is ridiculous.

There are plenty of examples out there of people who do evil that are not religious!

I want you to think about this statement for a second:

You might be the only representative of Jesus that some people know!

When you contemplate that → how are you doing?

Too often the image that people have comes from us.

Are we giving them the right image of a follower of Jesus?

What is the most common thing that people who are not religious say about Christians?

I hear it over and over again

CHRISTIANS ARE A BUNCH OF HYPOCRITES

And you know what? They are right!

Of course we are -→ that is why we come to church, to try to teach us and learn about the way of Jesus and how we need to do a better job in following.

We understand that we are not perfect → but we believe that when we decide to follow the way of Jesus that God can help transform us and make us new people.

The Bible reminds us of this many times.

The other thing I hear, and I think it too has lots of truth → is that we as Christians do lots of the things we do out of self interest.

We do good so that we won't do to hell

We do good so that we can get out ticket punched to heaven

Not only is it about heaven and hell, but many want to get blessed by God and that motivates them to do good.

I think lots of times, we start out that way.

We begin our Christian journey out of fear or out of the desire to gain something. But as we grow in our understanding of the way of Jesus, as we mature on our walk we change.

Paul talks about this in his letter to the church at Corinth.

2 Cor. 5:17

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

So do we just get rid of religion because sometimes people miss use it?

What about all the good things that religion has done.

EDUCATION

Virtually every major university was started by the church
State schools as well as private
Northwestern, Duke, Harvard, Yale, Princeton . . .
Kansas State
Virtually every historically black college

Should we just throw those out?

What about the work done by UMCOR (United Methodist Committee on Relief)

Katrina
Tsunami
Haiti

Or about the things that we do

The food we collect every week
The people fed every Monday night and Saturday afternoon

The toys collected for the Salvation Army

The backpacks

The mission trips

Youth
New Orleans
Haiti

The work with LARRI

Why do we do this → because we want to help people

We want to do just what Micah reminds of what God desires of us:

'With what shall I come before the Lord,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?'
He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you

but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?
Micah 6:6-8 NRSV

I was moved by the words that Bono, the lead singer of U2, shared at the 2006 National Prayer Breakfast.

I'd always read the Scriptures, even the obscure stuff. There it was in Leviticus (25:35)...

'If your brother becomes poor,' the Scriptures say, 'and cannot maintain himself... you shall maintain him... You shall not lend him your money at interest, not give him your food for profit.'

It is such an important idea, Jubilee, that Jesus begins his ministry with this. Jesus is a young man, he's met with the rabbis, impressed everyone, people are talking. The elders say, he's a clever guy, this Jesus, but he hasn't done much... yet. He hasn't spoken in public before...

When he does, his first words are from Isaiah: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,' he says, 'because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.' And Jesus proclaims the year of the Lord's favour, the year of Jubilee. (Luke 4:18)

What he was really talking about was an era of grace—and we're still in it.

. . .

Check Judaism. Check Islam. Check pretty much anyone.

I mean, God may well be with us in our mansions on the hill... I hope so. He may well be with us in all manner of controversial stuff... maybe, maybe not... But the one thing we can all agree, all faiths and ideologies, is that God is with the vulnerable and poor.

God is in the slums, in the cardboard boxes where the poor play house... God is in the silence of a mother who has infected her child with a virus that will end both their lives... God is in the cries heard under the rubble of war... God is in the debris of wasted opportunity and lives, and God is with us if we are with them. . . .

God is with us if we are with them.

WOW.

How is God with them?

Through us

When we reach out in love with the way of Jesus

When we feed the hungry

When we cloth the naked

When we seek justice for all of God's creation

If people saw us modeling that all the time → people would flock to join us.

We all want to make a difference in the world. Regardless if we are religious or not.

Whether you are a follower of the way → come and join us.

Join us as we go on mission trips

Join us as we feed the hungry

See all the good that you can do, and help us make this world a better place

Religion does so much good.

Let's not throw out the baby with the bath water.

Sure we have done, and will no doubt continue to do some bad things.

But with the help of the way of Jesus → we are trying to change.

Monday was the federal holiday celebrating one of my hero's. Maybe he is one of yours.

I want to end this morning by letting you listen to a bit of a sermon that he preached.

Dr King was who he was because of the influence of religion in his life.

Don't ever forget that

Dr King's life was hard. He faced many times when Christianity was bad. When "Christians" dressed up in white robes threatened him and his message.

I want you to listen to Dr King as he shares some of that struggle in a sermon called: A KNOCK COMES AT MIDNIGHT.

<<AUDIO CLIP>>

Frustrated and bewildered

What would you do if it was that hard to live out your journey with Christ?

I want to offer a challenge to you → I don't think it is that difficult of a challenge

10 hours this year to work with poor
1 week in next 5 years on a mission trip (or sponsor somebody)

Not asking that much of you

What would you do if to live out your journey with Christ that your children might be killed, your wife killed – YOU killed

Where would you find the strength to go on

If it were me – I think I would look for an island to hide on

But he didn't do that

Where did he find the strength to go on.

Listen as he tells us. This is right after telling that story in his sermon

<<AUDIO CLIP>>

STAND UP FOR JUSTICE
STAND UP FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS
STAND UP FOR TRUTH

And he will never leave you alone!