

An Alternative Christianity

Stephen Van Kuiken
North Congregational U.C.C.
Columbus, OH
April 30, 2023

Ancient Witness: Galatians 3:23-29

We are all-too-aware that Christianity is in trouble. People have been leaving the church in droves, and the younger generations are finding Christianity to be irrelevant in their lives. They are rejecting Christianity in favor to no religion at all.

Many of us are asking, why? And I think that one of the major reasons for this exodus from Christianity is the church itself. I think that it's important to look at what the church has become to understand this trend.

More and more people are leaving Christianity because there are seeing a kind of Christianity that is anti-science, anti-gay, anti-immigrant and anti-choice. And many of them are saying, "If that's what it means to be a Christian, then I'm out." You've all seen the Jesus fish on the bumpers of cars, and I really liked it when the Darwin fish appeared with the little legs on it. But then there were stickers with the Jesus fish actually eating the Darwin fish! Not very nice. The former Episcopal Bishop and author, John Shelby Spong, once wrote,

Unless biblical literalism is challenged overtly in the Christian church itself, it will, in my opinion, kill the Christian faith. It is not just a benign nuisance that afflicts Christianity at its edges; it is a mentality that renders the Christian faith unbelievable to an increasing number of the citizens of our world.

And it is a selective literalism. Jesus' words about forgiving debts and selling possessions to give more to the poor are viewed as metaphor, but the passages about the apocalypse, the end times, and the warrior Christ coming to conquer all of the enemies are viewed as literal. I've mentioned recently that New Testament scholar, John Dominic Crossan said,

It's not that those ancient people told literal stories and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically, but that they told them symbolically and we are now dumb enough to take them literally.

More and more, being Christian in America is linked with a nationalism, a false-patriotism. More and more it is identified with the Republican party. More and more, we are seeing a kind of Christianity that is tribal, defining itself as an in-group, while all others are viewed with suspicion, condescension or even hatred. Other nations, other religions, and those who are not religious at all—all are viewed as outsiders.

So much of Christianity is identified with White privilege and maintaining power at almost any cost, as America is becoming more and more diverse. Of course, it wasn't that long ago that much of American Christianity justified the enslavement of Africans brought to this land against

their will. So it isn't surprising that this supremacist philosophy would still inhabit our churches in a slightly different form.

In America, we often typically see an exclusive Christianity, known for who they want to keep out or control and what ideas and voices they want to silence.

To paraphrase an old joke, after a person died, they found themselves as the proverbial pearly gates. And they were lovingly welcomed and given a tour. And there were all kind of people—Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, Indigenous, and non-religious people, too. They were from every nation, many cultures, gay, straight, binary and nonbinary, rich, poor. This wonderful, beautiful array. And not just humans, but animals and other living things, as well. And they came by one part and the guide says, "Shhh. We need to be very quiet here. These are the American Christians. They think they are the only ones here."

There was a comedian, Emo Phillips, who told one of the best religious stories I've ever heard:

Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't do it!" He said, "Nobody loves me." I said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?"

He said, "Yes." I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" He said, "A Christian." I said, "Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?" He said, "Protestant." I said, "Me, too! What denomination?" He said, "Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" He said, "Northern Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region." I said, "Me, too!"

Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912." I said, "Die, heretic!" And I pushed him over.

It can really get ridiculous, can't it? The circle can get smaller and smaller, keeping more and more people out.

But how does this happen? I think that this has happened in Christianity through the centuries because Jesus—what he did and what he said—is missing. It's ignored. Instead, we find something that you can call "Creedal Christianity." You all probably know about the creeds. They were developed in the fourth and fifth centuries by the leaders in the church, who found themselves merged with the Empire. Constantine, the emperor of Rome, decided that Christianity would help unify his kingdom and made it the preferred religion of the land. He put certain religious leaders in positions of power and called Councils to define the faith. And so you see Christianity merging with money, power and status at this time.

But this alliance came with a cost. The Jesus movement became disconnected from its roots. Brian McLaren said,

Before Christianity was a rich and powerful religion, before it was associated with buildings, budgets, crusades, colonialism or televangelism, it began as a revolutionary nonviolent movement promoting a new kind of aliveness on the margins of society.

Christianity lost track of its founder and his message. And through the years, this happened over and over again. And the thing about Creedal Christianity is that Jesus is missing. One of them, the Apostles Creed, goes: “I believe in God the Almighty... and in Jesus Christ his son, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate and was crucified, dead and buried.” But wait a minute. This summary of the faith goes from the conception and birth to the suffering and death and skips over everything in between! Jesus is missing! His life, his teaching, his deeds, everything.

In this kind of Christianity, the only thing that’s important about Jesus is that he was a victim and that he died. He’s a mere sacrifice for a kind of God who demands a sacrifice, a blood-thirsty God who needs to be appeased. And here’s the thing. When Jesus is just a sacrifice, you can have a Christianity that can be used as a tool of the empire, that views women and subordinate to men, that is heterosexist, that justifies conquest and colonialism, that is a slaveholder’s religion. It is a Christianity that removes all the content about the teachings of Jesus.

And when you remove Jesus, himself, you can have a kind of Imperial Christianity for the empire, either the Roman Empire or the American Empire. And then you can use it to dominate, conquer and impose your will on others. When Jesus and his teachings are removed, the faith loses its way. It becomes a counterfeit religion, an empty shell. And no wonder that people want no part of it. As Henri Nouwen said,

For Jesus, there are no countries to be conquered, no ideologies to be imposed, no people to be dominated. There are only children, women and men to be loved.

In Jesus and his teaching, we find the linkage between God and violence broken, and we experience a God who loves all people without condition. In Jesus, we see a vision and compassion that is inclusive, that crosses borders and cultures. We see that the walls of hostility and division are demolished. And as Paul said, there is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave nor free, there is no longer male nor female—and we can add to this list today that there is no longer straight or gay, binary or nonbinary—for you are all one in Christ Jesus. According to the message and teaching of Jesus, we are all one, and we need to act that way.

And yet, the followers of Jesus have often turned the words of Jesus upside down. Instead of proclaiming with Jesus the message of God’s inclusive love, the church often proclaimed exclusion, from the very beginning. The story has always been that God is always more inclusive and more loving than God’s children think. Carl Sandburg was once asked, “What is the ugliest word in the English language?” After much thought he said, “Exclusive.”

And so what is an inclusive Christianity? Well, an inclusive Christian community is not merely a community that strives to include all people. That's physically impossible. An inclusive Christianity points beyond itself. It says, "We are not the whole thing. But we are part of the whole." We strive to demonstrate in our limited way God's great impartiality.

Inclusive Christianity is the opposite of what one can call Imperial Christianity. Imperial Christianity seeks to impose one view on all others. It seeks to conquer or convert. It is the Christianity of the Crusades. This mindset seeks to clean the church and drive out all the impurities—all the liberals, progressives and those with different views. It seeks to force its own particular understanding of creation, of birth control and sexuality, of marriage, and of when human life begins, upon the entire nations.

An Inclusive Christianity does not fear encounters with other faith traditions, but embraces them. It sees other traditions not as competition but as being complementary.

And so what I'm talking about is an Alternative Christianity to the kind of Christianity that is so prevalent in our nation today and that is being rejected by so many people. A friend of mine, Miguel De La Torre, teaches ethics at Illiff Seminary in Denver. We brought him in for a lecture series at my last church. In his new book, he says that if we are going to overcome "the white Jesus of genocide, slavery, Manifest Destiny, gunboat diplomacy, colonialism and all manner of oppressive doctrine," what we need is a "badass Christianity that rejects and repudiates the prevailing cult of EuroChristianity." The world needs to hear an alternative from churches like North Church. I'm talking about a Christianity that is a best kept secret, that so many people don't even know it exists. I'm talking about a Christianity that takes the Bible seriously but not literally. That believes in scientific facts and empirical truth. Where the Jesus fish and the Darwin fish are kissing. I'm talking about a Christianity that focuses on the life and teachings of Jesus as our guide. I'm talking about a Christianity that works for the kingdom of fairness and justice on earth not just in heaven. It's a kind of Christianity in which we are called to use our heads and our hearts. It is not a Christianity with all the easy answers, but one that embraces mystery and ambiguity. There is diversity of thought and ways of being. And like the parables of Jesus, it leaves us sometimes with more questions than conclusions.

And so, may this be a community that continues to strive to point beyond itself, demonstrating God's inclusive, universal love for all.