

Scoring One's Own Goal

When I talk to people about the problems facing our young adult Christians, I find myself easily persuading them of the core problems (for example, when I tell them of the studies that have been done that show that we are not losing young adults because they are mad at the Church). More than half of those who leave actually tell themselves they will come back someday; it's just that "someday" never comes. The bigger problem is that they only look at the Church as one part of their lives, one thing to do among many. And life provides an endless number of alternative things to do.

I rarely have any problems explaining my next observation. I see many devotionals, talks from the pulpits and similar sources reminding us to take time for Church. Clearly, even the faithful can relate to the exodus going on in the Church, as we are reminded of it everywhere and at any given time.

I also don't seem to have much trouble explaining my solution to the problem: teach them not to separate the church life from the rest of their lives. Indeed, when I suggest we integrate these two parts of our lives, I am often given the "I'm going to nominate you for this year's Captain Obvious award" look. But here is when my winning streak ends. When I am asked how I propose to implement this solution, my response is generally met with skepticism.

To begin with, I will choose John 14:6 -- "[Jesus said] I am the way, *the truth* and the life." (italics mine). I have built much of my apologetics, especially for non-Christians, on the idea that Jesus *is* truth, and that any honest attempt to find truth is an honest attempt to find Jesus. While no one has disagreed with this premise, they seem to find the practical application of it absurd. For example, when one is researching for a school paper, one is searching for Jesus. When one is trying to decide the best route to take to get to the mall, one is searching for Jesus. When one tries to figure out if one's favorite team will win the championship, one is searching for Jesus.

Remember, we all just agreed that we need to bring the Church into the rest of the world. Well, these things are all part of the young adult world. Are we really serious about showing the young adults how their faith works in the rest of the world, or are we just in love with the idea of doing so? That being said, I do believe the gentle reader is allowed further explanation on my part, so I will present my answers to some objections and questions on this matter.

A) "It Is Not the Same": To be clear, I am fully aware that there are differences between, for example, baseball and the Eucharist. If there were no differences, they would both have the same name. But just like a man and a woman both have differences, yet are united in humanity, so too are the game and the real presence united in truth. All the apostolic churches (Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican) believe that truth is present in the Eucharist while wrapped in the mystery of transubstantiation. So too is a winner of a baseball game a truth wrapped in the mystery of the future.

I would propose that it is easy to convince a young adult the proper emotional response to the mystery of who will win a baseball game: anticipation, excitement and wonder. Indeed, I doubt any instruction on this matter is even necessary. But what happens when we claim that the mystery of the real presence is "different?" Are we not at the same time telling them that what they *feel* about the Eucharist should likewise be different from what they feel about the game? What emotions do we want them to feel instead? Are we not providing fertile ground for indifference and confusion concerning the Eucharist?

B) "We Should Not Profane the Church With Secularism": Make no mistake, I will never suggest that we should cheapen the dignity of the Church. But I also think it is too tempting to construct artificial barricades for the sake of being safe, as opposed to thinking things through. Evil finds its easiest passage into this world through laziness. To expect that an internal purity of the Church will somehow draw the rest of the world to it has been tried in Old Testament times and found disastrous.

The chosen people were called to be "a light to the nations" (Isaiah 49:6). Jerusalem was called to be the beacon for all to come to (Psalms 43:3). When the temple was built under King Solomon (beginning in 1 Kings 5:15), Jerusalem was literally the Earthly dwelling place of God. The whole world was expected to come to Israel (Jerusalem in particular). And the whole world did. Unfortunately for the Hebrews, the world brought its ideals into the Holy Land with them. Rather than Jews converting the pagan on God's home ground, pagans converted the Jews.

Although David himself never turned to paganism, we see that he was tempted and failed when he saw Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:1-5), a foreigner whose husband served King David. Their son Solomon took many foreign wives, and clearly more than necessary for legitimate political purposes of that era (1 Kings 11:1-3). In the end, Solomon even funded pagan worship sites (1 Kings 11:7-8) he allowed to be built. From that point, the books of Kings are a monotonously repetitious tale, where it was remarkable thing for a king to only allow paganism instead of actively supporting it. Only Kings Jehu (2 Kings 9-10) and Hezekiah (2 Kings 18-20) actually stood up against the pagan sites and destroyed them. For his piety, Hezekiah was allowed to die before the final judgment came on Judea (2 Kings 20:18-19).

By the time of Jesus, the Jews were in a "bunker in place" mentality as the pharisees demanded absolute orthodoxy in response to their clearly disintegrating culture. We even see this with John the Baptist, whom the people had to go to (Matthew 3:5). But in a remarkable change of divine strategy that I think is mostly overlooked, Jesus went *to* the people (Matthew 4:23). Not content with this effort, Jesus sent His disciples out so His message could be *brought* to even more people (Luke 10:1-20). They were sent out two by two, which brings back images from Genesis for the repopulation of the world, only this time with hope and salvation instead of bodies. And after His resurrection, Jesus explicitly told His faithful to "go to the ends of the Earth." (Acts 1:8). The rest, as they say, is history.

We can find no Biblical evidence to suggest that the best way to defend our faith is through defense. Indeed, all the evidence, including Jesus's own directions, supports exactly the opposite conclusion.

C) "Didn't The Early Christians Only Talk About Jesus?": I certainly can't answer for all of the early Christians, but in Acts (17:22-23), Saint Paul found Jehovah in the heart of the Athenian pagan temples, and he used this discovery to great effect in winning over converts in Athens. If it is possible to find Jehovah in a pagan temple, how much easier can it be to find Him in secular places? Even more so in a country founded on Christian principals.

D) "But What Is Truth?": This is a fair question, as "truth" can have many interpretations. Furthermore, as discussed earlier, what may not be true at one level might be true at another. But I think in the Biblical sense, we find that truth is all that is real. If it came from God, or from a virtuous act of human free will, then it is truth. In Genesis, we see God by Himself amid the nothingness of chaos (the symbolic meaning of the waters of the abyss in Genesis 1:2). It is from Him that all non-nothingness came to be, and all that came to be was described as "good." So all that is material is "good." We also see God making man in His image (Genesis 1:27), and while much can be said about

what this image is, it is obvious that any meaningful interpretation of it must include consciousness. As our consciousness comes from God, then it is inherently good as well.

There is a truth in man's ability to rule the land, whether to build a church or a baseball field. There is a truth in beauty, whether it is in a sunset or athletes perfecting their God-given talents and engaging in fair competition. There is truth to be learned when one reads either scripture or secular literature. There is truth in the universe, and there is truth in exploring and understanding the universe.

E) "What Difference Does It Make?": Of course, this is a difficult question to answer. We can quantify the damage done by young adults leaving the Church (2/3 of Protestants and 4/5 of Catholics between ages 18 and 22). The number of people calling themselves Christians drops 22% every year. And this is not a recent problem, one that might be an anomaly. The problem was noticeable 50 years ago and has steadily grown. I can't prove my ideas will work, but I can conclusively show that the *status quo* is going to be fatal for Christianity. And neither do I feel this one lesson I promote here will fix all the problems. This is a complex problem that does not have a simple cause, and a single answer will not fix it. I'm not looking for a silver bullet to fix all problems, I am seeking a new mindset to address each issue as it comes along. If we want our children to find God outside the Church, we need to show them where to look.

F) "What Do I Have To See Happen With This Suggestion?": What I hope will happen with this concept is that young adults will start believing Jesus can be found in everything worth doing or thinking about. I also hope that they will continue to respect Jesus. If these two goals can be met, I believe their "moral compass" will be a strong one.

If a child believes that Jesus is present in the outcome of a game *and* he has respect for Jesus, then I expect this child will be inspired to do the best he can while on the field, while also finding cheating to be abhorrent. I believe he will respect celebrity athletes for how they honor God in using the talents given them, but also recognize when Jesus is *not* present in the athlete (cheating, amoral lifestyle, etc.). Likewise, if he believes Jesus can be found by researching a paper, I believe he will be less likely to plagiarize and more likely to learn more than just the minimum. If a child believes Jesus is in music and art, I hope he will seek new and different ways of expressing himself while at the same time rejecting art that attacks human dignity.

G) "How Do You Explain All the Evil In the World?":

The truth of the flower is, not the facts about it, be they correct as ideal science itself, but the shining, glowing, gladdening, patient thing throned on its stalk -- the compeller of smile and tear ... The idea of God *is* the flower: His idea is not the botany of the flower. Its botany is but a thing of ways and means -- of canvas and color and brush in relation to the picture in the painter's brain.

-George MacDonald, Unspoken Sermons, Third Series, *The Truth*

At this point, my main argument is finished, but I do believe that this question reflects a reasonable concern. So if the gentle reader will bear with me, I will briefly address it and two more questions related to this line of thought before concluding.

I am not so naive as to ignore all the horrors of this world. Indeed, I suspect I know more than most. My motivation to help young Christian adults stems from fully realizing what it is they will be

facing after high school. My suggestion here does not deny the evil of the world; it is intended to be a tool to help identify what evil does exist.

Whatever came from God or the virtuous use of human free will is good. This may seem useless at first, until one realizes that whatever does not exist, or has come from a sinful use of free will, is evil. Take for example "death." God did not create death, man chose death with his abuse of free will (Genesis 3:6). Life is good, death is evil. Death is not "real;" it is a denial of what is real. We naturally desire life and fear death because we naturally recognize (respectively) the goodness and the evilness in them. When people grow weary of life and want to die, it is not that life has become evil, but rather that true life is being withheld from them. They long for the truth that was supposed to be.

H) Thought Exercise: We can use life and death for an even more complex situation. The differences between life and death are perhaps most obscured when discussing a "circle of life" situation. Those who wish to deceive us are suggesting that life and death are neither good nor evil because one cannot exist without the other. This seemingly innocent argument has just enough merit to appear to be reasonable (the very worst kind of deceit). But the real danger is not in the concept itself, but rather in how it is interpreted. It is a "gateway" to greater misunderstandings that do ultimately have the power to tempt one away from the Church. The problem is that this concept suggests that truth and untruth are the same. This toxic idea owes its origin to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, but to talk more about him and his theory is beyond the scope of this paper.

If we look for Jesus in the circle of life, the only obvious place we see Him is the "life" half. But the study of nature (which is also an activity where we can find Jesus) conclusively shows that life does feed off of the dead. So if Jesus is not in "death," yet is found in the circle of life, what is going on? We seen in Genesis Chapter 3 that death entered the world through man ignoring God. The story of the Flood makes it clear that man's responsibility over creation (Genesis 9:1-3, 7) did not end with the curse following the fall of man. We also see that living creatures are to procreate (Genesis 1:22). This mandate also survived the curse. Finally, we see time and time again man's evilness being used by God for a greater good. The story of Joseph being sold into slavery (Genesis 37) and the pharisees sending Jesus to be crucified (John 18:1 - 19:16) are but two examples of this concept. The whole Bible testifies that God never really abandons us; at worst He lets separation encourage us to seek Him. We can see Jesus in the circle of life despite death, not because Jesus is death (as suggested by calling life and death the same), but because God never abandons us in our deaths, but rather allows creation a way to heal itself (at least to some degree, the prophecies of the apocalypse must still be accounted for, but not in this paper).

I) "Are You Not Being Overly Nitpicky Here?": Well, this is always a danger when one is attempting to prevent a major evil from happening instead of waiting to deal with the evil once it comes. No one likes waking up to a fire drill, until it is not a drill but the real thing.

I do not mean to suppose an uncritical look at the circle of life will drive a young adult out of the church. What I *do* mean to say is that an uncritical look can lead one into accepting that truth and untruth are the same (i.e., that life and death are the same). And, if we are honest with ourselves, Christians are really bad in promoting the idea that truth are untruth are the same. We often tell our young that sometimes we have to "agree to disagree," which means we are to agree in some manner with others, no matter how wrong they may be. We tell our young to "remove the wooden beam from your eye first; then you will see clearly to remove the splinter from your brother's eye." (Matthew 7:5) through confession, but then admonish them from "judging others" (a serious misrepresentation of Matthew 7:1-5). Without realizing it, we are raising the next generation to believe that there are no absolute truths,

only perspectives. Why should we be surprised when ideas such as believing that men can really be women become popular when our young have been told every perspective is at least partially right all the time? Why do we expect them to hold on to God in the world when they have been told God is only in Church? Why do we expect them to say such a behavior is wrong when we have told them that we are not to judge what is wrong?

By the time a child will accept transgenderism as being credible, he will have already been told that hundreds of other contradictory statements are also true. I'd rather be accused of nitpicking the circle of life now in hopes the young will see the fallacy of transgenderism on their own later, than trying to convince them later that they have gone too far.

Conclusion: I have begun by stating what appears to be an obvious solution to an obvious problem and noted the resistance to this solution. I have addressed matters that I feel are relevant in debate my solution, provided a thought experiment to show how this solution could be applied to a very common concept in our culture, and related it to a social issue that is being hotly debated today. I have also briefly discussed an underlying evil and shown how small errors can build up to a genuine evil. I believe we can best help our young now by helping them find God in the world outside of Church and by keeping the lies of the world out of Church. If we fail in either effort, we are scoring our own goals and helping Satan to win. I hope this helps those who are also concerned about the future of the faith, and the faith of our young adults in particular.

Raymond Mulholland
Original Posting Date: 13 October 2022