

## Would Jesus Be for Organized Religion?

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### Introduction: Problems with Organized Religion

Since you've come to this event, you're at least somewhat interested in the question, 'Would Jesus himself be for organized religion?' Maybe you're like me and you have an independent streak and you dislike the idea of organized religion.

Some of you might come out of a church background. Perhaps your parents were church-goers. Perhaps they brought you to church but for a variety of reasons you decided that it didn't mean the same thing for you that it means for them. I have a friend named Dorothy, whose church is going through a very nasty split right now. Because she grew up in that church, it's gotten her really disenchanted and depressed. All the people she used to admire and look up to aren't that anymore. She's told me that it affects her faith. Would Jesus be for this? Is this what I signed up for? My friend Dan grew up as a 1.5 generation Korean-American. His mom was a Christian and prayed for him every morning. He went to a Christian college that was and is mostly white. He experienced so much rejection from his white Christian counterparts that he became an atheist.

Maybe some of you don't come from a church background but you're really turned off by what you've experienced. You look at the Catholic church scandals in Boston or the racism in the Protestant church and feel that this thing called 'the church' is hopeless. A former Harvard international student I met last year asked, 'Are all Christians so pro-American? And if I became a Christian, would I have to count those people as my spiritual friends?' He wasn't very interested in that. My dad, for instance, is someone who combines all of those things. When I once talked to him about what he thinks about Christianity, he said that he walked into a church once and wasn't greeted, so he left and thought it was all a bunch of hypocrisy. Furthermore, he wondered, 'What were white American Christians thinking during the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II? Were they in agreement?' Maybe Jesus is an interesting person with a lot of good things to consider, but the church?? Maybe you're Jewish and look at the Crusades and Inquisition and wonder what's up with that? Maybe you see Christian groups as mostly social and not actually spiritual. Perhaps some of you have felt ignored, mocked, or even oppressed especially on occasions when the Christian community is gathered into that thing called 'church.' Who wants it? Does it do any good?

If you're asking those kinds of questions, you'd certainly be in good company. There are lots of people who had a difficult time with organized religion, specifically the Christian church in some form: The scientist Galileo Galilei was threatened by the Church for heresy when he claimed that the earth revolves around the sun. Even though he defied the Church, he didn't renounce his faith. But this begs the question of whether a person can believe in Jesus and in some sense reject the Church. To what extent can that happen?

One way to try to get through this question is to ask a series of four related questions. First, would Jesus be for disorganized religion? Second, is there a difference between good organization and bad organization, and is bad organization the problem? Third, can I believe in Jesus without joining the church? Fourth, how can my faith survive the church? Each of those four questions are important in their own way, but in the context of the larger question, they are deeply interrelated. Let's tackle the first one.

### Question 1: Would Jesus be for disorganized religion?

The first question is, would Jesus be for disorganized religion? Now, at some level, the idea that it can just be 'you and Jesus' or 'you and God' is attractive, at least to me, and here's where I can tell some of my story. For example, when I was 23, I was fairly disturbed that my Christian friends were apathetic towards poverty and other social issues. I thought the church I was going to was also apathetic. So I decided it would just be 'Jesus and me.' 'Forget them – I've leaving them behind.' I moved by myself into East Palo Alto, CA which, 3 years earlier, had the highest murder rate per capita out of any city in the nation. It was a tough neighborhood; kids played in trash bins and drug deals went down every day. But I formed relationships, befriended youth and families, and helped connect people with services. I wound up living in

this neighborhood for 4 years. In some ways I felt like I had left the church behind. But the truth be told, I wasn't actually alone. I was being mentored by a Christian couple named Jose and Jennifer Espinosa. They knew everyone, and they introduced me to these people. They helped me interpret them and helped me understand Mexican culture. They led a Spanish speaking Bible study where spiritual things really did happen, and they welcomed me into that. After a year or two, six other Christians moved in with me and we served that neighborhood together, and it was so much fun although I didn't really trust it, right? I mean, how long can a good thing really last? But it's lasted so far. When I got married and moved to Boston to live in a lower-income neighborhood out here, all these people still carried on and supported that community.

In reality, we had a basic level of organization that I didn't recognize all the time because it just felt like life. A big part of that was: I actually liked how simple things felt. I liked how responsive we were to the needs around us. It didn't feel rigid or overly structured. It also didn't feel like we were Christians on one day of the week and not the other six. We were on all the time. And the basic way we organized ourselves served a much bigger purpose – that was clear to me. I had come to Jesus for many reasons. One of them was that I believed that he has really good things to offer me and the world. I believed and I still do believe that his approach to human evil and injustice is the most compelling approach I've ever seen. But because I was actually starting to *like* other Christians again, I had to conclude that Jesus would not be for completely disorganized religion either. In the non-profit world, and especially in neighborhood organizing or community organizing, which my wife and I now do, *organization* is a very positive word because positive things have resulted from it. So I concluded that there must be something about *the form* of organization that affects people.

### **Question 2: Is BAD organization the problem?**

That leads me to question number two. My business background tells me that every organization tends to default into a mode where it serves itself. For example, when Hurricane Katrina hit, where was FEMA? The Federal Emergency Management Administration seemed to just serve itself when Katrina hit; it certainly didn't serve Katrina victims the way it was supposed to. The important thing for any organization is to be called to serve a mission that is larger and greater than the organization itself. I could see very clearly and very painfully that churches often forgot about the larger mission of Jesus to bring goodness and justice and healing into the world. Churches seemed to really care about themselves.

But in the process of trying to understand how to bring about justice, I had also been doing a lot of reading about social change. And when you do that, you start to notice that there have been lots of incidences when Christians organized themselves and others to protest injustice. For example, twentieth century non-violent resistance movements that were Christian in character. In Russia, Leo Tolstoy and some other Russian Orthodox Christians led a non-violent peasant movement against the Russian nobles who were corrupt and oppressive. Tolstoy based this on Jesus' teaching to love your enemy and be a reconciling force in the world. His writings became world-famous and led to other movements. The Korean Independence Movement in 1900's was led by Christians; 50% of the signers of the Korean Declaration of Independence were Christians, even though only 1% of the total population of Korea was Christian at the time. Christians led peaceful marches and were sometimes massacred by Imperial Japan, but they held on. Gandhi's non-violent resistance in South Africa and India was strongly influenced by Tolstoy and therefore Jesus. He knew he couldn't draw that much on the Bhagavad-Gita because the Hindu caste system legitimates war; the warriors have their own caste, right underneath the Brahmins. Then in the U.S., the Civil Rights Movement was led by the black church. Martin Luther King, Jr. said that if you wanted to be a part of the Civil Rights Movement, you had to agree to reflect on the life and teachings of Jesus every day. He knew that their boycotts and marches, which were very well organized, would demand spiritual and emotional resolve that could only be cultivated by regular contact with Jesus. Then in the Philippines, the Catholic believers led a 'bloodless revolution' that overthrew Ferdinand Marcos. They stood in the streets of Manila while Marcos' tanks and soldiers were coming. They put flowers into gun nozzles. The army couldn't fire on these people, so Marcos fled the country and Cory Aquino, a Catholic, became the first woman President of the Philippines. Then in the late 80's, a Catholic movement in Poland called Solidarity led the way to overthrowing the Soviets. How could it do that? Because Poland was 95% Catholic, and Polish resistance was organized in and through the Catholic Church, because the Church was the only institution not controlled by the Soviets. So the priests printed newsletters, handed out journals, and did heroic acts.

Then in Eastern Europe, a series of non-violent 'velvet revolutions' were triggered by students who had organized themselves to pray in strategic public places to prevent the corrupt government from arresting certain people unjustly. All of these things required certain levels of Christians organizing themselves. I found myself very impressed by this whole sequence of events.

In fact, the twentieth century was really disturbing for atheists. Why? On the one hand, because people have always claimed that the reason for war is organized religion. But the 20<sup>th</sup> century had more war-related deaths than the previous 20 centuries combined, and organized religion had nothing to do with it. What was the real cause of all 108 million deaths? Organized atheism. Atheism and secularism form nation-states, and the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the era of nation-building. It started with the Turkish genocide of the Armenians in 1914. Then it was colonialism and World War I. Then it was the Holocaust, then Stalin's purges, then Mao's Cultural Revolution, then the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. On and on the list goes. What form of organization serves nothing larger than itself? Nations.

In fact, if you look back through European history with the lens of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, you get a better view. The Crusades and the Inquisition were really exercises in Europe's early nation-building phase. The Crusades were just like secular colonialism and the fight for land. It was nation-building facing outward. The Inquisition was just like ethnic cleansing and the fight of national cohesion. It was nation-building facing inward. So even though Christians were involved and they certainly made mistakes, and we certainly need to be apologetic about that, the real structural cause of the Crusades and the Inquisition was the same as that of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: nation-building. It's important to distinguish between correlations and causes. So if you get upset about the Crusades and the Inquisition, you ought to be 20 times more upset by nation-building, the great Enlightenment modernist project. Yes, organized religion made some mistakes, but organized atheism really sucked.

On the other hand, the twentieth century was disturbing for atheists because the Christian community worldwide demonstrated incredible faithfulness to Jesus and incredible impact for justice and healing. In this case, Christian churches, whenever they started to primarily serve themselves, become corrupt. But it's not linked to being organized per se. There is good organization and there is bad organization. Let me give you two more examples of Christians being organized in a good sort of way: India and Poland.

In India, there is a state called Kerala. About 25% of Kerala's population is Christian. They are called 'Thomas Christians' because they trace their heritage back to the apostle Thomas who they say landed in Cranganore, India in 52 A.D. In 1498, when the Portuguese navigator Vasco da Gama landed on the Malabar coast, there were an estimated two million Christians across the land, and they had 1,500 churches. Throughout Kerala, you can find Christian families that are proud to claim descent from ancestors who were baptized by Thomas, and songs that speak of these traditions, along with Christian last names like Philip, Thomas, Matthew, and so on. Today, Kerala is now a very unusual state in India because it's been influenced by the Christians. The caste system is downplayed and in some places non-existent. According to metrics defined by the United Nations, if Kerala were its own country, it would rank sixth in the world in terms of quality of life, judging by literacy, infant mortality, degree of equality and inequality, and life expectancy. This is the impact of Jesus through the Indian Christians. It is mildly organized to positively impact the community around it with the love of Jesus, and it has.

The second example is Poland during the medieval period. Most European countries during the Middle Ages persecuted the Jewish Diaspora community. Poland did not. Poland was a Catholic country and it welcomed Jews from all over Europe. From the 13th to 18th centuries, Poland welcomed Jewish refugees. Why? Their form of organization had a lot to do with it. Poland was a network of independent nobles with a comparatively weak central monarchy. So they were not organized to be national. Neither did they have a nationalized view of land. They were organized to be more accommodating and compassionate. They didn't have an alternative political identity to uphold other than the fact that they wanted to obey Jesus' teaching to be compassionate and love others. So Poland extended considerable political equality and rights towards Jewish settlers, and a Jewish Renaissance developed that became Hasidic Judaism.

These insights confirm my basic theory. Organization itself is not the problem. It's the particular form of organization and the purpose of that organization that is either good or bad. Would Jesus be for organized

religion? Well, certain kinds of organized religion, absolutely. He wants his people to be organized to serve, love, and promote justice and healing in the world. And this is what you need to look out for.

Let me tell you that I see this played out a lot. My wife and I attend a small church of about 25 adults. Part of our mission is to reach out to youth in our area. My wife and I now live in Dorchester in the area with the highest crime rate according to the Boston police. If you go down the red line to Ashmont you'll get there. An estimated 17,000 youth live in the immediate area. It also has the highest concentration of DSS case families, so when the Department of Social Services needs to intervene in a family's life because of abuse or neglect, they create a case on that family. Our area has a lot of need. Well, one couple at our church does a lot of work with urban black teenagers. During the year, they host groups for the teens. Every summer, they organize a trip to a fun camp in New York where they bring 10 – 20 young people. The youth have a blast, doing water skiing, ropes courses, outdoor games, music, you name it. They also learn about Jesus there, and how Jesus brings justice and healing and goodness into our lives. And they respond very positively. For example, two summers ago (2004), one young man came who asked a lot of questions. Would Jesus forgive me even I killed someone, he asked. They said yes. He committed his life to Jesus. When the camp ended and they came back, this young man turned himself into the police for murder. That was Jesus working in this young man's life through the organization of these adults in my church and the adults in the camp. Now, three other young black men have turned their lives around because of Jesus. They stopped dealing drugs, getting into fights, and all kinds of craziness. Now they are organizing themselves to bring hope and healing to their friends. I think that is awesome, and you would too if you saw it.

### **Question 3: Can I believe in Jesus without joining the church?**

That leads to question number 3. Can I believe in Jesus without joining a church? There is a sense that YES, you can believe in Jesus without joining a church. You don't have to go to a church worship service on Sunday. Why not? Because there's actually nothing sacred about the time and places Christians meet. In fact, the Bible records the earliest Christians meeting in their homes over meals, at any time. They did not have a once a week thing. Jesus himself said to people that they didn't need to go to the Temple in Jerusalem; they could just worship him wherever they were. We know that the Christians in the Roman Empire took that literally: they met in the catacombs for a while. The idea that Christians should gather once a week on Sunday or in a few cases Saturday is borrowed from the Jewish synagogue of the first century. Early Jewish Christians simply continued meeting in the way they did when they were Jewish non-Christians. Everyone else basically copied them. But there's nothing actually sacred about that. It's form but not necessarily substance so it doesn't really matter.

For example, a man I know named Carl Medearis lived in Lebanon for many years. He engaged Muslims, often high level statesmen and high profile folk, and talked to them about Jesus. Many of them committed themselves to Jesus. But Carl doesn't tell them that they now have to go to 'a church.' They need to take Jesus seriously and learn about him, but they can do that in many different ways.

On the other hand, there is a sense that NO, you cannot believe in Jesus without joining the church. That's because when you believe in Jesus, you become a part of the church by definition. The church is the Christian community, not a ritual on Sunday or a building where things happen. The larger question is whether the Christian life is like playing the violin or like playing football. You can play the violin by yourself, although it's great if you have a team of other musicians. You can't play football by yourself; you absolutely need a team. Real Christianity is like playing football with Jesus as the one source of real strength and power to last the whole game. The reason is because Jesus taught a lot about reconciliation. Not just conflict management, but healthy relationships that promote love, service, healing, and justice. And in order to really live out the teachings of Jesus, you have to love him and draw on his strength through a living, vital connection with him to demonstrate those things in relationship with people who are also in relationship to Jesus.

So for example, without Jesus, I would probably not be friends with my African-American friend Khary. First of all, because my parents were racist and they raised me to be racist, too. But Jesus is totally against racial prejudice when he brings people together under his leadership. Second of all, before I came to Jesus, all I wanted to do was make money. But Jesus is totally against selfish materialism. So that's what

enabled me to join Khary in doing a startup business that we as Christians hoped would bring technology related jobs to the inner city. Third, before I came to Jesus, I was totally independent. But Jesus' mission and purpose in the world are so big they can't be accomplished individually. So I had to look for partnership. Fourth, before I came to Jesus, I did not deal well with failure. I didn't like being reminded of things I've failed in. But Jesus is totally against that. So even though the dot-com meltdown of 2000 – 01 hit us hard and Khary and I didn't pay ourselves for 8 months, and we wound up putting our hopes on the shelf, I still love my brother and count him as one of my closest friends. He is totally valuable to me and Jesus is really the center of our friendship.

Real Christianity requires a team context. Why, because Jesus wants to demonstrate himself in the context of your relationships. He involves others. That's why in that sense, you cannot believe in Jesus without joining the church, defined broadly. The evils of racism and classism would be much less if people really understood this. But part of the problem is that people have had an individualistic 'Jesus and me' thing going on, and they did not allow Jesus to address major areas of evil and injustice through them. The U.S. would be a much different place if that had happened. It could be closer to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which is headed up by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and incorporates the teachings of Jesus. It's bringing real healing and hope to South Africa after Apartheid.

#### **Question 4: How can your faith survive the church?**

Ultimately, you have to face the question of lame Christians and what to believe in spite of them. That's question number four. How can your faith survive the church?

Philip Yancey is a very engaging writer who wrote the book *Soul Survivor: How My Faith Survived the Church*. When I picked up that book, I thought, 'Well, maybe he'll talk about how there are other reasons to believe in Jesus, like the historical fact of his resurrection, or the evidence of supernatural design in the Bible, or evidence of a Creator in the universe, or ways to experience Jesus in the here and now.' Let me tell you that if you're interested in those things, I could talk to you about them, too, because they're important. What surprised me is that he listed Christian heroes of his that weren't perfect people, but really embodied something he saw as true. He listed people like Martin Luther King, Jr. the activist minister who stepped out to lead the Civil Rights Movement, not because it was a safe and glamorous thing to do, but because of Jesus. He talked about Dr. Paul Brand the doctor who became the world's expert on leprosy, not because there was so much money to be had, but because Jesus cared so much about leprosy. He talked about Christian after Christian that he admired. My friend Karl Wirth recently became a Catholic in Boston. It wasn't easy, given all the craziness going on. But part of the reason is because he really respects Archbishop Sean O'Malley. I guess you could say that your faith can survive the church because he found Christians who struggled with the same things he did, but who really lived out their faith...really.

Illus: Bono on Feb.2, 2006 at the National Prayer Breakfast made a few very cool remarks. He talked about how for years he turned away from organized religion for all kinds of reasons. He stayed a believer in Jesus, in part because of very dedicated Christians serving AIDS victims in Africa. But: 'Then, in 1997, a couple of eccentric, septuagenarian British Christians went and ruined my shtick—my reproachfulness. They did it by describing the ... year 2000 ...as an opportunity to cancel the chronic debts of the world's poorest people. They had the audacity to renew the Lord's call—and were joined by Pope John Paul II, who, from an Irish half-Catholic's point of view, may have had a more direct line to the Almighty. ... When churches started demonstrating on debt, governments listened—and acted. When churches starting organising, petitioning, and even—that most unholy of acts today, God forbid, lobbying... on AIDS and global health, governments listened—and acted.'

Why is that? Why did those churches act? Why did Bono make those remarks? Ultimately because of Jesus. Jesus is the one who showed his commitment to the poor. Jesus is the one who showed his commitment to the sick. Jesus showed his commitment to the outcast, the leper, the AIDS victim, the forgotten, even the enemy. Jesus is the one who motivates us in this group to go to New Orleans this spring break to help with Katrina relief. Jesus is the one who empowers people to continue manifesting that kind of life if we let him do that through us, which is why he deserves all the credit for all the good things Christians do, and Christians deserve all the blame for the mistakes we make.

If you are someone who has really wrestled with the idea of the church and whether it's important, I hope I've set some context for you. And I hope that my responses to those four questions have been helpful. First, would Jesus be for disorganized religion? In some sense yes, but not an individualistic religion. But fundamentally no, because he calls his people to accomplish things that are larger than what we can accomplish individually. That requires some organization. Second, is there a difference between good organization and bad organization, and is bad organization the problem? Yes, absolutely, and there are ways to tell. Third, can you believe in Jesus without joining the church? Yes and no. 'Yes' because you don't have to buy into any particular structure because structures can change, but 'no' because you have to buy into the substance. Fourth, how can your faith survive the church? By looking at people who really take Jesus seriously, because that's how you'll see who Jesus really is. And ultimately by looking at Jesus square in the face and asking yourself the brutally honest question, 'What do I really think about him?' Then, finally, you want to experience him.

So you might think about what is a next step for you. Perhaps some of you are just hearing about Jesus for the first time, and your next step would be to find out more about him. Perhaps some of you would consider yourself a Christian who has turned away from the church. Your next step might be to figure out how to reengage with the Christian community. Maybe this has generated some more questions, which would be great. Right now, I want to give you an opportunity to discuss your questions or respond to what you've heard. So let's break up into small groups. If you'd like to come talk to me, you can do that.