

22 April 2011

KCC Question of the Week

Dear Friends (Known and Unknown),

The question of the week this time round is surprisingly a rephrasing of the first question we shared. I guess things work that way sometimes. Well, without further adieu, here's *The Question of the Week*:

I'm trying to get a sense of how to respond to someone who says things like "church is just 100% a social club" and "I don't have to go to church to be religious."

Here's an attempt at a response:

When I read this question, I found myself thinking of some of the classic images for the community Jesus' followers (a.k.a. the church) in the Bible. I'll throw a mere three out there in the interests of brevity.

Body (1 Corinthians 12). This refers, of course, to one, living organism made of many different parts. When the Apostle Paul uses the image he highlights that the body as a whole doesn't live well if all of the parts are the same or if only the "flashier" parts are respected.

(You know how this works. People say, "Oh, you have beautiful eyes." But, they rarely say, "Oh, you have beautiful kidneys." Yet many people would argue that it's actually harder to live well without kidneys than it is to do so without eyes.)

Nation (1 Peter 2). A nation is made of many people. There aren't many nations (read as "any") where the sign at the border says, "Welcome to MyLand. Population 1."

Temple (1 Peter 2, again). In this image the different people in the community are envisioned as the different bricks that only together can become the temple of God's presence. One brick does not a temple make.

Looking at these images, I can't escape the fact that God intends the spiritual life to be personal but not private. Religious life is envisioned within a network of relationships. It's social. This morning I read a quotation from a house church leader named Felicity Dale:

"Think of church like family. You don't 'go to family.' Family is what you are wherever you are. This is about spiritual families. We just live life with Jesus. So every day is Easter."

The great commandment to love God is fleshed out by the following command to love neighbor as self. Jesus doesn't do any work until he calls your typical, run of the mill people (like us) to do it with him. In the New Testament, almost every time we read "you" it's intended to be read in the second person plural ("y'all" in Texas-speak). On and on it goes.

And this sociality makes sense. Life is just like that. None of us conceived and gave birth to ourselves. None of us makes it through a day of life after birth without depending on others, even if we don't typically recognize it. After all, who made computer you're reading this on?

BUT...

Without the accent on the living, healing, challenging presence of God, these social images lose their power and purpose, even if they retain their form.

I remember a book on new forms of church life in the 21st century I read a few years back. In it the author wrote about what I'll term "shallow social life and deep social life."

He said that the church is designed to be a community of deep social life. That doesn't mean church fellowship is not often fun or made of only "deep" religious conversations. It means that the relationships in the church are not simply ends in themselves. The church is not designed to simply be another group of nice people interested in making comfortable lives for themselves in the world.

Their fellowship instead is built around a larger calling, vision, and goal – to represent the coming to earth of God's rule as seen in Christ. In other words, the social fellowship of the church is designed to represent the words, deeds, and presence of Jesus through its life together. This is what makes it a deep social life.

To use language from the Gospel of John, the love of Christ's disciples is to be a witness to the surrounding world that Jesus is the Son of God and worthy of devotion. But, the church is constantly tempted to settle for a shallow social life. In this spiral of shallow social life, the church becomes in-focused and often fixated on its own institutional survival. It becomes an "anti-witness" to Jesus, if you will.

In response to this "anti-witness" you frequently hear people outside the church say things like "the church doesn't look like Jesus, so what exactly is the point of church anyway? It is just a dime-a-dozen social club, and a pretty boring one at that."

I identify with that personally. I didn't become regularly involved in church life until college, so I can imagine life without being a part of church. Also, as a pastor I tend to see people burned over and over again from times when the church lost its focus on Jesus. So, if someone is asking the question, the best response is not to talk at them, but to show them how Jesus (and so his church) has made you a different, more compassionate person.

Criticism like this can also provide a service. It can help the church ask itself a series of important questions like...

Is the church community really interested in knowing Jesus better and experimenting with how to live with Christ as a model for life? Or is it really just playing the same games with the same goals and politics as other groups?

Is the church more interested in feeding its own bureaucracy, or in feeding the people Jesus seemed to be interested in?

Is worship self-fixated and self-congratulatory, or is it centered on hearing from, encountering, and following the living God met in Jesus Christ?

Thanks for the question.

Peace in Christ,

Robert