

Being a Follower of Jesus without Following

Numbers 11:24-29; Mark 9:38-41

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Have you ever wondered who is and who is not included in God's family of faith? We assume Baptists are included, right? We certainly hope so! What about Presbyterians? They hope so. We do too. Catholics? Some Protestants are not so sure. What about Jews? Are they included in God's family of faith? What about Muslims? Hindus? The honest skeptics? Just how far does the tent of God extend? Is there really a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea? Or are those just words we sing?

Many thoughtful Christians wrestle, mostly privately, with questions like these. Some fear raising these questions for discussion because some people are threatened by them. Someone is sure to say, "These questions were answered ages ago. What's wrong with you? Can't you believe what was settled in the third century A. D.?"

So some come to worship, question in their heart, but keep quiet.

At earlier times the faithful embraced the black and white answers that were handed to them. *You cannot have God as Father if you do not have the Church as Mother.* First said by Cyprian of Carthage in the third century A.D., that was the official position of the Roman Catholic Church until the Second Vatican Council in 1962. You cannot have God as Father if you do not have the Church as Mother. Of course, that was bad news for us and other Protestants. What it meant was that you could not have God as Father if you did not have the Roman Catholic Church as Mother, a position, of course, that excluded all Protestants. That exclusive position of the Catholic Church changed with Vatican II. This is now the official position of the Catholic Church. Speaking of other Christian denominations and non-Christian religions, the Vatican II stated,

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and teachings, which, although differing

in many ways from her own teaching, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men.

With the stroke of a pen and a change of heart, we were recognized as part of God's family of faith. A "ray of truth which enlightens all men" was recognized within Baptists, other Protestants, and even within the world's other great religions.

Aren't we glad Baptists never held such an exclusive position? Well, lest we Baptists become a wee bit smug, let us not forget our history. Ever heard of Landmarkism? There are still a few Landmark Baptist churches around, but not many. It's where we got the phrases "closed communion" and "alien immersion." Baptists too went through a period when we said that you cannot have God as your Father if you don't have the Baptist church as your Mother, and it had to be our specific kind of Baptist church. Landmark Baptist churches believed that they were the only true churches in the world. Some went so far as to say that the Kingdom of God should be called the Baptist Kingdom of God, and that all true Christians throughout history were Baptist, whether they knew it or not! Landmark Baptists "closed" the communion table to other Christian denominations, believing that they were not really Christian and had no business around the Lord's Table. If you were baptized in another denomination, even if your baptism was by immersion, that baptism was considered to be invalid, an "alien immersion," they called it. I have visions of little green men being dunked when I hear that phrase! There's no salvation, no true faith, they proclaimed, outside our expression of the Baptist church. All these others—Catholics, Presbyterians, Lutheran, Methodists, and even non-Landmark Baptists—are false churches. Though their hearts be genuine, their minds are deluded. Unfortunately, the Landmarkists would say, they have committed life's greatest error and joined the wrong church. The consequences of that error, they preached, are grave and eternal: damnation to Hell.

And guess what? They quoted Jesus, from Luke's Gospel: "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters." It was black and white, they believed. You're either with me or you're against me. Their Jesus was not fond of the hymn *There's a Wideness in God's Mercy*.

Somehow they overlooked the text from Mark 9 that I read to you earlier. Keep in mind that Mark's gospel was written first. It's not placed

first in the New Testament, but it was written first. Mark records an incident involving the apostle named John. John told Jesus that he and the other apostles saw an unidentified man casting out demons in Jesus' name. But this man was not one of their followers. They decided therefore that he had no right to cast out demons. So John said that they tried to stop this unauthorized activity. This unidentified man wasn't under the tent. Everybody knew that. He wasn't a true follower, so they put a stop to his alien good deeds.

Please listen to what Jesus said. "Do not stop him," Jesus told John. Then Jesus said this, reversing how Luke recorded it: "Whoever is not against us is for us."

Wow, what a difference that makes! Remember how Luke recorded it: "Whoever is not with me is against me." Here in Mark, though, which was written first, it is turned around: "Whoever is not against us is for us." Then Jesus gave that teaching about a cup of cool water that we all know and love. "Truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward." Whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear Christ's name, that person, Jesus said, will have a reward.

What did he mean by that? What reward? Was he saying, like the Second Vatican Council, that he rejected nothing that was true and holy in this man's behavior? That there was a ray of light that he saw in this man, even though he wasn't a follower of Jesus? Was he saying that casting out a demon or offering a cup of cool water were the essence of what it meant to be a follower of Jesus? And can we assume that the cup of water was simply one example of many acts that capture the essence of what it means to be a follower of Jesus? Yes, we can. Jesus stood before John, indeed before the world, with a word of grace, an accepting grace, an amazing, inclusive grace, a grace that did not stop this man from doing a good deed. Why? Because this unnamed man was *being* a follower of Jesus without being a follower. He was being a follower of Jesus by doing what it meant to follow Jesus.

One little word. One two-letter word in our text brings great illumination. Sometimes it is the insignificant word in a text that is the most significant. In this text it is the word "us." This is what John said, "We tried to stop him, because he was not following *us*."

Since when did someone have to be a follower of John or Peter or any of the other disciples? Isn't our faith about being a follower of Jesus? The problem in this text was not that the man wasn't following Jesus. The problem was that he wasn't following the disciples. He wasn't doing it their way. He wasn't orthodox. So the disciples responded the way the church throughout history has typically responded when someone doesn't fall within the boundaries of its creeds. Stop that! What's wrong with you? We settled this long ago!

As a result, the church has a painful history of drawing people out of its circle, pushing them out from under the tent. You and your beliefs don't match our creeds. You are not following *us* very well, and the consequences of your error will be grave.

Mark 9 is for you who long for, indeed pray for, a large tent, a large family of God. A man over there is helping a vulnerable child. He believes differently than you, but he is doing what Jesus would do. We can say to him, "Whoever is not against us is for us." A woman over here. She is helping construct affordable housing. She too believes differently than us. We can say to her, "Whoever is not against us is for us." We can say they are followers of Jesus without following.

You who come to worship, question in your heart, but keep quiet, we have reason to hope that the tent of God is very large. We have reason to believe that there really is a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea. The next time you see someone doing good, remember the words of Jesus: "Whoever is not against us is for us." That person may be a follower of Jesus without following.

Closing Prayer

Lord, who is grace personified, forgive the hurt we have inflicted on the world in your name. Bring healing to those who have been hurt. And transform your Church that we may be channels of Your love and grace. Amen.