

June 11, 2017

Church Planting

Why People Reject Christianity

Acts 19:8-10

Opening words: A.W. Tozer once wrote, *"I remind you that there are churches so completely out of the hands of God that if the Holy Spirit withdrew from them, they wouldn't find it out for many months."* That quote makes me ask you these questions. How long do you think it would take for us to discover the Holy Spirit had withdrawn from Western Reserve? Would the Holy Spirit's exit be an instant discovery? Would the Holy Spirit's exit be a slow erosion? How many would never notice the Holy Spirit was gone? Do you think the Holy Spirit left Western Reserve years ago? Do you think the Holy Spirit was ever here? Do you think the Holy Spirit is with us today?

This is sermon number forty-six in my sermon series, *Church Planting*. You remember my task. I am preaching through the Book of Acts. Why Acts? Because, Acts is the testimony of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who created the church originally and it will be the Holy Spirit who must revive the church again. Human effort is not enough. Our scripture reading for today is Acts 19:8-10. My message is called *Why People Reject Christianity*.

Acts 19:8-10 Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. ⁹ But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. ¹⁰ This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.

C.S. Lewis once said, *"I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else."* I find some truth in that quote. If you find some truth in that quote, say, **"Amen!"**

Like last week, we find ourselves in the nineteenth chapter of Acts. Do you remember the story? Paul is in Ephesus and encounters a man by the name of Apollos. He has much to offer. He is a well-educated charismatic public speaker. He has much to offer, but his theology is incomplete. He has only received John's baptism. That means his understanding of God is based on moralism, not grace. He is not alone. Many in that area of the world at that time had the same deficiency. Last week, Paul baptized twelve of them in the name of Jesus and they were filled with the Holy Spirit. The question I asked you to answer last week was this one: Have you experienced the Holy Spirit? Your answer is important because the Holy Spirit will change everything.

This week, the story continues. According to the text, Paul goes into the synagogue and speaks boldly about Jesus for three months. The success of last week's text is short-lived. Three months of preaching produces nothing. Verse nine tells us some in the crowd became obstinate and became a problem. We do not know what problems they created, but we do know this group rejected Christianity. Listen to what I am about to say. I am not talking about pulling their church membership from an isolated congregation. I am talking about walking away from the faith itself. I wonder if they ever regretted that move? I doubt it. You know the truth. They were not the first group to reject Christianity and they would not be the last. In our time, many have decided to reject Christianity.

This week, I googled "celebrities who have rejected Christianity". Here are some names that were listed:

Kathy Griffin
Katy Perry
George Clooney
Bruce Willis
Kevin Bacon
Hugh Laurie
Jack Nicholson
Brad Pitt
Daniel Radcliffe
Bill Maher

I found those names on stars.topix.com, so I know they are true 😊. They are not alone. How many people do you know who have rejected the Christian faith? Ask them why they left the faith and they will be glad to tell you. It is my experience that people reject the Christian faith for several reasons. If you know of one person who has rejected the Christian faith, say, "**Amen!**"

Life's Hardships

Some have rejected the faith because of life's hardships. Do you know of anyone who has rejected Christianity because of life's hardships? Do you know of anyone who refuses to watch the news? Not because of politics, but because the news itself is so painful to hear. The international, national and local news is filled with some painful stories. Each one reminds us that life is hard. How many examples do you need? On Tuesday night, we heard about a young woman who had duct-taped her eleven-year-old son in a chair in the basement of the family's home so she could take her six-year-old daughter to the YMCA. On Wednesday night, we heard about the death of a ten-month-old baby. The young woman entrusted to watch the child was sentenced to eight years in prison. Many believe that is not enough. Then, I heard about a mother who pulled her child's teeth out in the bathroom at Walmart. These stories are painful, but they are not alone. We hear horrible stories regularly. Not just on the news, but in our daily lives, stories of disease, stories of violence, stories of natural disasters. Stories of innocent lives being lost and facing hardship. We have grown tired of all the sadness.

I could preach on the hardship of life weekly and the theme would never grow old. Some have rejected the Christian faith because they forget the true source of the hardship. It isn't God, it is Satan. Never forget, we live in Satan's playground. If you know of someone who has rejected the Christian faith because of life's hardships, say, **"Amen!"**

Religious Hypocrites

Some people reject Christianity because of all the religious hypocrites. Do you know of anyone who rejected the faith because of religious hypocrites? Through the eyes of God, there is nothing worse than being a hypocrite.

Ted Haggard is an American evangelical pastor who founded the New Life Church in Colorado Springs, Colorado. It is one of those large mega-churches. He was one of the leading voices of Christianity in America until 2006. For it was in that year a man by the name of Mike Jones told the world that Haggard was a hypocrite. For years, Haggard taught his congregation that sex should only be between a man and a woman within marriage. Jones told the world Haggard ignored his own teachings. Haggard hired Jones, a male prostitute, for sex. Together they shared crystal meth. There is no other way to say it: Ted Haggard was a hypocrite. In both the Old and New Testaments, hypocrisy will not be tolerated. In our society, hypocrisy will not be tolerated. Not every hypocrite makes the headlines, but every hypocrite has a negative impact. Do you know of anyone who has rejected the Christian faith because of a single hypocrite? If you have ever encountered a religious hypocrite, say, **"Amen!"**

Peer Pressure

Some people reject Christianity because of peer pressure. Do you know of anyone who rejected Christianity because of peer pressure? They are the saddest group because they don't even know they are gone. According to ABC News, 83% of Americans say they are Christian, but only 39% of that group prays daily. That makes me wonder if they really are Christian. They don't even know they are lost.

Several weeks ago, I was called by a local funeral home to officiate at a service. Before I agreed, the funeral director told me to listen to the whole story. The deceased was baptized Methodist, became a spiritualist, and married a Hindu. I said, "Do you really want *me*?" The funeral director said, "I don't know who else to call." I said, "Let me talk to her sons." I called the deceased's sons and we met here at the church. Her sons, who were grieving because they loved their mother, were very nice. They couldn't have been more respectful to me. As they told me about her life, I discovered she was a product of our time. Not wanting to be judgmental or ignorant, she embraced all the world religions. She found value in the teachings of Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, Moses and Hinduism. Of course, she believed in an afterlife. I have never met a person who didn't want to go to heaven. I looked at them and said, "I am in a hard spot. I am a Christian minister, so I only really believe in Jesus. If I do your mother's funeral, you are only going to hear about Jesus." The sons responded, "That is fine. She believed in

him too." That good woman represented many people in our time. They don't even know they have rejected the faith. They have compromised their beliefs and their lifestyle to fit in. Call it what you want. It is still peer pressure.

How many people do you know who have rejected the faith and don't even know it? Jesus spoke clearly about love, but we love selectively. The Bible speaks clearly about how to worship, but we worship only when it accommodates our schedule. The Bible tells us to tithe, but we offer the church our leftovers. The Bible tells us sex should only be between a married man and woman. I hate to say it, but all other sex is fornication. How many people live together and think it is fine because these are "modern times." Never forget it: The Bible is still the inspired word of God. Do I have to go on? Do I really have to go on? We have a society of people who call themselves Christian but ignore the faith's teachings. They are lost and they don't even know it. How many people do you know who have rejected the faith because of peer pressure? If you know of someone, say, "**Amen!**" The question is not, why do people reject the Christian faith. The real question is, why people stay in the Christian faith. Why do *you* stay in the Christian faith? Everyone must answer that question for themselves. This is my reason:

The date was July 1, 1986. I was twenty-nine years old. It was a watershed day in my life. For it was on that day my first wife died. It has been decades, but I have never told the story. I am determined not to cry today. Her cause of death was a rare form of leukemia. To the best of my knowledge, there is still no cure. The years prior to her passing were filled with hardship, financial debt and loneliness. Your twenties should be a time of fun. Mine were not. My twenties were filled with overwhelming responsibility.

In the summer of 1986, I was living in the old Saint Clairsville District, serving three United Methodist congregations. That day started like many of my days. I went to the hospital to visit the sick, leaving her sick in bed. When I returned home, I called up the stairs, but she didn't respond. I ran up the stairs of that old rundown parsonage to find her gone. I called 911, made sure the doors were unlocked, and gave her mouth to mouth resuscitation until help came. They took her to the hospital in Wheeling, where they validated her death. I have next to no memories of the next week. I endured the funeral and the people. Everyone seemed to have a question I couldn't answer.

I must have looked exhausted, so a good friend by the name of Jim offered me an airline credit to escape. I decided to fly to Colorado and spend some time with my sister, Janet. Every day she had something planned for us to do. We went to the top of Pike's Peak. We toured the Air Force Academy. We went to a baseball game in Denver. We hiked in the mountains. The days were fun but the nights were long. I have always hated nights. I still hate the night hours. It is too quiet. There is too much time to think and second guess yourself. There is too much time to explore what you have done wrong. When I flew home, I was forced to answer that horrible question: What are you going to do with the rest of your life?

My first Sunday back in the pulpit was hard. I don't remember my sermon topic, but it really doesn't matter. My three small congregations didn't hear a word. Everyone pitied me. Like here, I stood in the back of the sanctuary after the benediction and greeted the crowd. Once again, they offered to help me, but what is there really to do. They shared their sad stories I didn't want to hear. One guy said what many were thinking. He said, "I am surprised you came back. What happened to you just wasn't fair. I thought you would leave the ministry. Your story makes me wonder if there is a God." Can I be honest with you? That thought never crossed my mind. I never considered leaving the ministry and I certainly never considered rejecting the faith.

Actor Brad Pitt says he walked away from the Christian faith because he found Christianity to be stifling. In my darkest hours, I have found the faith to be comforting. I have never questioned the fact that God is in control. I have never questioned the fact that God has a purpose for my life. I have never questioned the fact that heaven is waiting for me when I die. I have never considered rejecting the Christian faith. Have you ever considered rejecting the Christian faith? It is a question everyone must answer. Why do *you* remain in the Christian faith?

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