

## The Secret to Church Growth

On one occasion after Jesus finished teaching in the synagogue, a number of His disciples were offended at His teaching and said, *“This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?”* and many of His disciples turned back and no longer followed Him, (John 6:59-66).

This can be a problem: we don't like it when Jesus reminds us that He's God and we're not. We don't want a god who wrestles with us or calls us to repentance. We want a god who never challenges us, a god who approves of everything we think, say, and do. What we'd really like would be a God who said of anything we happened to like doing, 'What does it matter so long as they are happy!'

But that's not how God is. Sometimes He tells you things you don't want to hear. And the fact that His judgment differs from ours shouldn't really surprise us, especially since the collective wisdom of humanity pales by comparison to the wisdom God has in His little finger. Now God could let you be and leave you to wallow in your sorry state, but He loves you far too much to do that, and He demonstrates this love for you by saying what needs to be said - painful though it may be - calling you to repentance and refining you like precious gold.

You are a Divine work of art, and God will continue to pore over you until His masterpiece has been perfected. There may be times when you wish God would relent, that He'd let you follow your natural impulses and not try and make you into something so unlike your natural selves. But that would be for you to ask God to love you less. He says, *“Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent,”* (Rev. 3:19).

Sometimes people have accused God of being a selfish, egomaniacal dictator who insists on having everything His way. But you can only think this if you're an egomaniac yourself. If you think God needs you, think again. God needs nothing, and even though He needed nothing, Christ made Himself nothing and sacrificed His own welfare for yours. Far from being a narcissistic tyrant, the Incarnation, suffering, and death of our Lord reveal Him as a humble servant, and He will always tell you what you need to hear, even when it's unpleasant. Sadly, this will cause some to turn back from following Him, just like they always have.

Light has come into the world, but people loved the darkness instead. Adam and Eve chose Satan's word over God's, and it's been that way ever since. This is why so many people turn back from following Christ. Now you'd think those who reject Christ would leave the Church - and sometimes they do - but that isn't always the case. The weeds grow together with the wheat. Instead of leaving, sometimes people throw Jesus out and re-make the church in their own image.

The way to do this is to be like Thomas Jefferson. He had no use for many of Scripture's teachings, so he got out the scissors and created his own, miracle-free edition of the Bible. Now not many of us are arrogant enough to turn the words of the prophets into paper-mâché, but you can ignore what Scripture teaches easily enough, even if you never tear a single page out of the Bible.

There are times when Scripture says things we don't like to hear. When this happens, more often than not, people ignore God's Word and keep on following their heart, doing whatever feels right to them.

Do not be deceived: any Church that throws Scripture out the window and starts deciding for itself what's right and wrong is no longer a church, but a synagogue of Satan. Christians more devout than us have fallen prey to this error and liberated themselves from the “tyranny” of the Bible. *Let the one who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.* The only way to abide in Christ is to be unrelenting when it comes to God's Word, to repent when you fail, and to come back again and again for preaching and the Sacrament, week in and week out.

Granted, this isn't pleasant or easy. Unfortunately, for many, the secret to church growth is simple: ditch the Bible. Talk about Jesus and make it sound nice and religious, but whatever you do, when Scripture says something you don't like, ignore it.

But to do that is to embrace that which is harmful and to reject the One to Whom you're accountable. Jesus says, *“The one who rejects Me and does not receive My words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the Last Day,”* (John 12:48).

In Matthew 15:21ff, the Canaanite woman shows us how Christians respond when God's Word says things we don't like. Our Lord told her it wasn't right to take the children's bread and throw it to a dog like her. But she neither takes offense nor leaves. She embraces these harsh words because they're the words of her Lord, and then she ends up making one of the most profound confessions of faith ever uttered by human lips. She said, "*Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.*"

At this confession, the angels in heaven rejoiced. Christ praised the Canaanite woman for her great faith. She heard the Word of the Lord, painful though it was, and spoke a resounding AMEN. She continued to trust in God's goodness even when He looked like her enemy. All she needed were a few of the Lord's crumbs, because she knew the Lord's crumbs are better than the best the world has to offer.

To agree with God's Word is the fruit of faith. To have faith is to agree with Scripture even when it says things you don't want to hear. To have faith is to know that the will of God is always best, even when it isn't what you want for yourself. To have faith is to pray, "*Thy will be done.*"