

Bible Studies for Life for November 23: Becoming the church God made us to be

November 11, 2008

John Shore, author of *I'm OK-You're Not: The Message We're Sending Nonbelievers and Why We Should Stop*, invited non-Christians to share their opinion of Christians. Here are two that stood out:

- “I feel that Christians have got it all wrong; it seems to me that they’ve created the very thing Jesus was against: Separatism.”—T. O., Denver
- “I don’t know whether or not most of the Christians I come across think they’re acting and being like Jesus was—but if they do, they need to go back to their Bibles, and take a closer look at Jesus.”—L.B., Phoenix

Shore’s purpose in printing these comments was not to bash Christians, but to explore the relationship between Christians and non-Christians. More to the point, these opinions were not made by people who take an active stand against Christianity. They are bare statements about the impression we Christians make when we go out into the world. As you can see, it isn’t pretty.

In general, non-Christians notice our lack of love—both towards them and among one another—and they are shocked by it. God created the church to be a source of his love, a place where our differences would be celebrated and used to advantage. But the whole system breaks down if we don’t understand why God brings so many different people together in worship.

Different parts, one purpose

Church is not a social club, a spiritual duty or place where we can go to feel important. It's supposed to be a reflection of God himself. How does God do that? By bringing together a diverse group of people—each created with a different purpose, a different strength—and unifying us in one grand purpose, which is glorifying God. It isn't the fact of our sameness that gives the church impact. It's the fact that so many different people can be unified in spite of our differences.

In Ephesians, Paul talks specifically about this issue. He says we are called to “keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism: one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:3-6). Like the human body, made up of different parts with different functions, each of us was designed to be unique while working with all the other parts.

Unity among diversity

Each of us was created with a unique purpose, and we each walk a different path with God. So when God brings all our differences together, forming one church body with myriads of gifts and personalities, he creates a community where all needs are met.

How would it work if every town only allowed one type of shop within its city limits? Let's say your town only allowed doctor's offices. When you needed groceries, you would have to drive to another town. To get a haircut or supplies for home repairs, you would need to go to two other towns. Not only would it be inconvenient, this kind of separatism would keep some people from receiving the kind of care they need.

God rejoices in our diversity. He doesn't want a church where all members look alike. He wants us to celebrate our differences, not squelch them to fit in. Because there are needs within each church that can only be met by

different types of people, and there are seekers who will only come to Christ when they see Christ in someone who looks like them.

Don't judge one another

The sin nature can make us condemn people whose walk is different from ours. And since the church holds such a variety of people, we often find a lot of judgment within the church. But God is the only judge. When we sit in the judgment seat of God, we dishonor him and bring judgment on ourselves. "For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (Matthew 7:2).

We need to remember to keep our focus on Jesus. Remember Peter's walk on the water? As long as he kept his eyes on Jesus, the waves were as solid as concrete under his feet. But when he began looking around to see the magnitude of what he was doing, he lost his footing and began to sink.

Like Peter, if we take our eyes off Jesus, we are likely to sin. When we see things in others that make us uncomfortable, rather than trying to correct those differences, we need to take our concerns to God in prayer. He will either correct those behaviors in our neighbors or he'll set our attitudes straight.

In the end, the actions of those around us have no effect on our eternal security. On Judgment Day, we will be held responsible for our own decisions and no one else's. So it behooves us to put more energy into judging our own thoughts and actions than those of the people around us. "You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat Each of us will give an account of himself to God" (Romans 14:10, 12).

Love is both the message and the medium

The church can only be as strong as it is unified. Our message of hope only

can be delivered through God's supernatural love. Yes, we are all different, and differences tend to create division. But when God's Spirit is in control, differences become a reason to celebrate, not argue. They cause us to turn towards God, not away from him. And they draw us together instead of apart.

Let's not get caught up in petty jealousies or disputes. Let's stop judging one another. Instead, let's become the testimony we were intended to be. By looking to God and letting his love flow through us, we can show the world why Christ is the answer to all our questions. Only then will our churches have the impact God intends them to have. And only then will non-Christians be drawn to our faith.

Discussion questions

- *What are the God-given qualities that make you unique?*
- Do you feel free to express those differences at church?
- When you see people who have a different gift mix, a different worship style or a different calling, how does it make you feel?
- How could God use those differences?