

ARE YOU FOR CHRIST OR FOR YOUR CHURCH?

Today's Text: Mark 9: 38-42

Extracts:

Now John answered Him, saying, “Teacher, we saw someone who does not follow us casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow us.” But Jesus said, “Do not forbid him, for no one who works a miracle in My name can soon afterward speak evil of Me; for he who is not against us is on our side” [Mk 9: 38-41]

Cardinal Angelo Sodano was the Vatican's Secretary of State, the second most important position, from 1990 until 2006 when he was appointed Dean of the College of Cardinals.¹ In 1995, the then head of Vatican's doctrinal department, Cardinal Joseph Raetinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) referred to him for a full-scale investigation an allegation that the Archbishop of Vienna (Austria), Cardinal Hans Hermano Groer, had sexually abused young seminarians in the past. Sodano reportedly blocked it and many suchlike reports from Europe and America, calling them “petty gossip.” Now, fifteen years later, the Roman Catholic Church has been rocked by proven cases of sexual abuse by top clergy members, leading to resignations of archbishops in Germany, Ireland and Belgium and possible court cases in America.

Faced with a similar situation, most of us would do exactly what Cardinal Sodano did. That is because we tend to be very protective of the public image of our denomination or church. We tend to believe that the enemy is unfairly out to get us. Yet, every church that I know is currently plagued by similar scandals. So, what is going on? Are we following Christ or our churches? In this week's study, Jesus has defined how to know the followers who are on His side. Are you one of them? Let us find out!

¹ Based on the following sources: Philip Pullella, “Cardinal accuses Vatican official of cover-up,” http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/37051286/ns/world_news-europe/, Sun., May 9, 2010 and “Angelo Sodano,” *From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angelo_Sodano

1. Background: Christ's Church

One of the disciples, Apostle John, came to Jesus one day to seek His clarification on a matter that seriously bothered him. He had seen someone casting out demons in the name of Jesus but the person did not follow them, His disciples [Mk 9: 38]. Two thousand years later, John's observation still plagues the modern church. In today's language, John's comment can be cast as follows, "Lord, I have seen someone casting out demons in Your name but he does not belong to our church."

Today's church operates in denominations with each one claiming superiority over others, even giving the impression that only their members will go to heaven!² The Bible version you use depends on your denomination or your pastor's choice. The religious television channel you watch depends on your denomination or congregation. The Christians you fellowship with depends on where you worship. When you ask Christians for their religion, they will proudly tell you that they are Catholics or Anglicans, Baptists or Pentecostals, Shouter Baptists or Celestians, etc. Even the early church already had the problem when some saw themselves as followers of Paul or of Apollos or of Cephas or of Christ, prompting Paul to ask the Corinthian church, "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" [1 Cor. 1: 11-13].

Jesus replied John that he should not forbid the person because no one that works a miracle in the name of Jesus can soon afterward speak evil of Him. Therefore, *he who is not against Jesus is for Him* [Mk 9: 39-40]. The Lord's response to John can be understood as follows:

a) *Your church is not The Church!*

John's position was that anyone who was not following them did not belong to them. In like manner, we tend to assume that only those who follow our mode of Christian worship are the true followers of Christ. That leads us to the mistaken conclusion that our church (denomination or congregation) is the church that Jesus said He would found, the one He would give the keys of the kingdom of heaven and against which the gates of hell cannot prevail [Matt. 16: 17-19].

Our chauvinism is misplaced because it is based on ignorance-driven arrogance. If our claims were true, then the seven churches to which Jesus sent messages through John on the island of Patmos would still be standing till today [Rev. : Chaps. 2-3]. In fact, where they once stood are now in Muslim territories! A few years down the road of time, many of the church buildings where we currently hold our services will be no more, if not in ruins! Therefore, your church is not The Church.

² "Churchianity at War with Christianity," *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 4, No. 6, 9 March 2003; http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_4/PDFs/6_ChurchianityatwarwithChristianity.pdf

b) *But your church may have individuals who are members of The Church!*

The Church that Christ is talking about is made up of individuals who are not against Him. Such a church is *one body with one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism and one God [Eph. 4: 4-6]*, tenets that are embedded in the Apostles' Creed which is commonly shared among all Christian denominations.

However, that your denomination upholds those seven basic tenets of Christianity does not necessarily mean that *everyone* who belongs or worships there is a true follower of Christ. For example, would you regard gay bishops or those who sexually molest children or members of their congregation or misappropriate church funds even in a Spirit-filled church are for Christ? In the place of worship at Shiloh where God did not allow the word of Samuel to fall down, it was in the same place that the two wicked sons of Eli the priest were sleeping with women that assembled at the door of the tabernacle of meeting [1 Sam. 2: 21-22]. Writing to the Corinthian church, Paul said, "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles" [1 Cor. 5: 1].

Yet, the common practice in a good number of today's churches is to try to first cover up for offenders unless or until it becomes an embarrassment to the image of the denomination. For example, it was only recently that the Vatican reversed its earlier decision, to now accept as true the allegation that Father Marcial Maciel, the Founder of the Legionaries of Christ (a priestly order in the US) had sexually molested a child and even fathered a child himself.³ Nevertheless, a good number of Roman Catholics remain faithful followers of Christ.

From the forgoing, we can conclude that *following Christ is an individual thing* even though a good place of worship (called a church) can help or hinder our steady walk. Clearly, you would want to operate in an enabling environment. Unfortunately, you may not find one, no matter what churches say or advertise on television! Therefore, you need to put your eyes on the ground to identify the kinds of worshippers you sit close to each time you go to your church. Are they following Christ or their church? Remember, as you point one finger at others, the rest of the fingers are pointing at you, as if saying, "How about you?"

2. Are you one of Christ's true followers?

No matter how small or large may be the size of your church or denomination; you may come across all sorts of people, some of them merely masquerading as worshippers when in truth they are something else! From my personal experience

³ Philip Pullella, "Cardinal accuses Vatican official of cover-up," http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/37051286/ns/world_news-europe/, Sun., May 9, 2010

and discussions with family and friends in several other denominations, we can identify the following types of worshippers, among others:

a) *The Manipulators*

The manipulators are those who see the church as an organization to use for the pursuit of their personal or professional aspirations. They form cliques and shifting alliances that promote or enhance their influence and power. They have a hand in every intrigue or crisis in the church but you cannot find their finger prints, no matter how sophisticated are your forensic techniques! They tend to be astute politicians and/or magicians operating within the church.

Politicians are always looking for votes that will enable them to remain in power. Therefore, they have *no permanent friends but permanent interests*. They are quite common in the larger and more popular congregations. They are generous with open donations, especially during the annual harvest celebration. They covet big or respected religious titles. For example, Nigerian Christians that have been to the Holy Land use the title of JP (Jerusalem Pilgrim) in a country where Muslims who go on the *Hajj* to Mecca call themselves *Alhajis*. Now some blatantly corrupt Nigerian public figures that have only as much as made just a mere transit through any airports in Israel use the JP! When they speak at public forums, they freely throw in copious references to God or Jesus! Their reward is that they easily get elected (or nominated) into positions of influence in their church or elsewhere. Clearly, such politicians are not in the church for salvation. They are following the vote, not Christ! If you do not know them, they can make you stumble.

While the politicians operate in the physical realm, there is a group of worshippers or church leaders who know that they can only obtain power (or whatever they crave for) by claiming spiritual powers that God has not given them. They may pose as prophets or healers but in reality, they are magicians since the source of their powers is satanic. A good example can be found in the ministry of Philip, one of the seven deacons appointed by the apostles. When he fled persecution in Jerusalem and came to Samaria, he preached Christ there and multitudes believed him when they saw miracles of healing and casting out of demons [Acts 8: 1-7]. Among such new converts was a sorcerer named Simon who had performed magical wonders in the past such that the people had mistakenly called him “the great power from God” [vv. 9-13]. When Peter later came and Simon saw that by laying hands on people, they received the Holy Spirit, he offered money to Peter to give him the same power. Peter cursed him, saying, “Your

money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money” [vv. 14-23].

It is remarkable that the most coveted offices in the house of God are those that tricksters can use to make money or enjoy undue influence. For example, a pastor or leader who cannot convince his members about what he wants done couches it in such terms as “God told me so,” or “The Holy Spirit says.” Be careful because Satan poses as an angel of light; so are his messengers [2 Cor. 11: 13-15]. If what they are telling you to do contradicts the word of God, run! You are dealing with manipulators, not true followers of Christ.

b) *The Crusaders*

Even in the midst of the spiritual rot that you may find where you worship, there will still be a hard core of true believers who have not succumbed to the seducing spirits of the manipulators among them. These are the crusaders who are not afraid to tell the truth or die for it. Take the example of Stephen, one of the seven deacons appointed by the twelve apostles to take over the administrative chores of their ministry [Acts 6: 5]. Stephen was said to be “full of faith and power” and his work produced “great wonders and signs among the people” [v. 8]. Some manipulators from the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandians and others) that could not resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which Stephen spoke “secretly induced men” to testify that they had heard him “speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” They stirred the people and leaders of the congregation to drag him before the council [vv. 9-12]. Stephen stood his ground and gave them an excellent *exposé* on the Christ, from the Old Testament to the new. At the end, he told them quite bluntly, “You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit, as your fathers did, so do you.” They could not stand that and they stoned him to death [Acts 7: 1-60].

Take also the example of Paul’s ministry in Ephesus. God did wonders among new followers of Christ by the hand of Paul. However, some manipulators, notably the seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, thought they could continue to mislead their congregation as in the past. They called upon the name of Jesus to cast out evil spirits, saying, “We exorcise you by the name of Jesus whom Paul preaches.” The evil spirit replied, “*Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are you?*” The man in whom the evil spirit resided attacked and overpowered the sons of Sceva [Acts 19: 1-16]. The new converts knew that Paul was in deed a true crusader for Christ. Consequently, the fear of God fell on both the Jews and Gentiles there and “the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified” [v. 17].

c) *The Indifferent Majority*

The manipulators and crusaders may constitute less than a quarter of the congregation. The rest fall into the group that we can call “the indifferent majority.” It is made up of those who know so much but have chosen to play safe. They hear nothing or see nothing. They will not defend crusaders nor expose or punish manipulators. As long as they get rewarded by the manipulators for their loyalty, through rapid and undeserved promotion to higher spiritual ranks or top administrative positions in the church, all is well! Such lukewarm people cannot be for Christ because they are denying Him before men [Lk 12: 9].

According to the statistician, if a man’s head is in the fridge and his legs are in the oven, *on the average*, his body temperature is normal! The truth is that his head is freezing while his legs are burning. Therefore, that man is dying! Today’s average church or congregation is in that state. Statistically speaking, the people who give a bad name to the church may be less than ten percent of all its members. It is also true that those working to uphold true followership of Jesus Christ are about the same ten percent. So, the bulk of eighty percent in the middle are lukewarm, trying to play the ostrich or play safe. If nothing is done about it, sooner than later, that church will die. You are either hot or cold or Jesus will spew you out of His mouth [Rev.3: 16]. That is why every denomination needs to deal with anti-Christ conduct among its members because “a little leaven leavens the whole lump” [1 Cor. 5: 1-13].

3. Conclusion: The bottom line is how Jesus sees you!

From the forgoing analysis, we can conclude that it is *the aggregation of true followers in all the denominations that constitutes the Body of Christ called The Church*. That is the point that Paul has made to the Corinthian church when he wrote, “You are the body of Christ, *and members individually*” [1 Cor. 12: 27]. Such followers may not be among the prominent members of your denomination or church. They may in fact not hold any office. But they know that they are not looking up to their pastors or bishops whose conduct could easily discourage them. They may in fact be persecuted in their respective congregations for their inflexible stand on the truth of Jesus. For example, they could be overlooked for promotion or elevation to higher offices not because they are not spiritually qualified but for their “disloyalty” to the leadership of that church

The Church of Christ is holy and without blemish but there is no single denomination that can meet those standards. Therefore, stop following your church leaders blindly. Instead, follow Jesus who alone is the author and finisher of your faith [Heb. 12: 2].