

THE CHURCH: A SAFE PLACE FOR EVERYONE



Well, that's just great, Jesus, but it would be nice for us to know, if you don't mind. It would be nice to know if you are, in fact, planning on making your grand Second-Coming entrance sooner rather than later. It would be nice to know if you've, quite frankly, had enough of us trying to bring your Good News to life a little more day-by-day: trying to love our neighbor as ourselves, trying to take care of your Creation, trying to be wise rather than foolish with our gifts of time and talents. It would be nice to know if you're convinced you have to cave in with the chaos that continues amongst us: not only over how best to run a nation, but your whole world, for that matter. We do not mean to pry, Lord, but...it would just be nice to know.

And it's not just so that we can plan ahead and make sure we have enough of the right supplies on hand for your designated eternal clock, but we *are* concerned about our own personal lamps going out before then: whether we do have enough light burning within our soul, enough Holy Spirit to keep us going for this seemingly endless struggle that tears us apart day after day after day. We know that you tell us over and over again that you most definitely provide us with *more* than all we need...but, it would just be nice to know for sure; that you have us thoroughly prepared for a life-long journey in this very world that you for some mind-boggling reason still so love. Nevertheless, if we cannot know the detailed game plan and the exact blueprints for the fully enacted Kingdom of God soon enough, then, we hope you can, at least, bless the questions we will continue to ask along the way.

For me, at least: about fifteen years ago now, I like to think God did exactly that. You see, even long before then, youth groups started doing what we like to call fish bowls, where the young inquisitive minds were to write down questions ranging from the Bible to current events to whatever issues affecting their daily life, and yes, there would always be a fair share of random complete nonsense questions just to make sure things didn't get too overly serious. The idea was pretty much anything was fair game to ask.

However, these wonderings were written anonymously on pieces of scrap paper and placed into a cheap bowl: questions some youth may not want to ask out loud in front of their friends, because we still have this cultural conception that asking such things is a sign of weakness. It means you're not as smart as everybody else. Not to mention if you dare wonder about the very bedrocks of our religion from the Creation story to the cross to the end times; that means you obviously don't have enough faith as the supposedly "true" Christians. Such debilitating fear has a way of stopping children of God of all ages from raising their hand in any learning context, because maybe what others think of our relationship with God might just impact how much God truly loves us, and whether God will actually grant us enough grace to keep our lamps lit for the eternal long-run.

I still remember being around that campfire with several Confirmation students fifteen years ago. I remember being completely blown away by the questions from these supposed-to-be immature, not-care-about-anything children (except gossip and boyfriends and girlfriends and the latest technology and fashion trends, of course!). And yet, with each unwrapping of a scrap piece of folded-over paper came a meaning-filled question, not just because they made me think, but those most beautiful scraps empowered me to change my outlook on ministry going forward. Because, the questions about the cross and other religions were written in such a way not out of concern for their own personal eternal welfare, but out of an even greater concern for their friends, classmates and family, whose lives with God looked ever so slightly different from their own.

Again, these supposed-to-be immature junior highers, not supposed to care about anything God-related, unleashed a bit of wisdom on my foolish outlook on the role of the church. I had just caved into the idea of going to seminary, and I was under this most stubborn impression that that whole process was about gaining all the knowledge possible in order to answer all these questions with the utmost scholarly depth, to remove all the fears and doubts for teenagers all the way through the Baby Boomers and beyond. And then I realized maybe the lamps within us are not lit by naming off chapter and verse of Scripture or rattling off whatever date of historical context as a resounding once-and-for-all answer to end the inquisitive conversations altogether. Evidently, the questions themselves bring in their fair share of blessing to further ignite the Holy Spirit flame, because that means we care enough to dare ask at all; that there's something within our soul that just is not satisfied yet with the way things are or always have been; as if there could be even more grace, even more hope, even more love than we ever gave this God credit for from the start.

And what continues to convince me of that Good News-altering moment is that as the years have gone by, and I think back to that campfire with a bunch of not-living-up-to-their-stereotype middle schoolers; I don't remember the answers I gave, just the questions: just their passion that they were not supposed to have, just their love for each other, most of whom they just met only days before, just their "it would be nice to know" attitude.

And still to this day I am convinced the church is not meant to have all the answers for all the inquisitive questions from all ages of God's children, but, by God, we will be the safe-haven for them to be asked at all. We will be the place and the people to convince every precious child of God that there is more than enough light within each one of them to last not just long enough for the good times and even the not-so-great times here, but to last for all eternity. It would be nice to know when God plans to unwrap that folded-over page for the Second-Coming chapter, but it's also rather nice to know that the light that has been set ablaze within us will insist on remaining lit with the same fiery passion that took on sin and death. That that page of God's most amazing grace has already been turned open for us, and it will never ever be taken away. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!