

The Holy Trinity

THE AUTHORIZED CHURCH

Matthew 28:16-20

Holy Trinity

Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

16Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. 18And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

DIAGNOSIS: Doubting Disciples

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Our Church*

Of Jesus' remaining eleven disciples, some "worshipped him; but some doubted" (v. 17). Such worship and such doubt still remain, both among us and within each of us. Even as Christians, our natural propensity to worship creates the edifices of "religion": what Luther called "church" in general. Yet due to our overwhelming bondage to sin, which also remains, our worship merely creates idols in our own image. The incandescent luminaries of religion—among them Buddha, Luther, and Gandhi—knew well the seductive power of religion. But if the doubters have it right, if only relatively so, they cannot escape mocking the Word of God. The edifices to our own glory

are grand indeed! Despite the grotesque misuses of government and religion that history records to our shame, humanity's best cultural milestones are achieved through our religious impulse—whether the pyramids or the Sistine Chapel, constitution or creed, art or science, justice or love. Nonetheless, the question put to us by the Word of God is whether any of these edifices, though powerful in themselves, have any power to save. When we worship, as we must, what are we doing that has any power to unbind us from needing to worship? And when we doubt, as we also must (if only to fall back on pseudo-religions), what are we doing to unbind ourselves from needing to doubt? For, whether we worship or doubt, it is our own doing for our own glory.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Preaches to the Choir*

No one has ever been fooled about religion's self-importance. The church radiates it through its stained glass. Religion dreams its own dreams, thinks its own thoughts, clothes itself in its own colors, preaches to its own choirs. The church is stuck in a spiritual stupor, chasing after its own tail. We are, as Luther said, "curved in upon ourselves." We simply will not, can not, envision a church that does not encourage our own aspirations. The church can only obey itself, and then applaud its own obedience. What religion has there ever been, Christianity included, that could think or preach itself into someone's heart? If that were the case, then the whole world would be simultaneously all religions at once, or Bahai. But if we are unified at all, then most likely it is in our own self-importance, under the guise of "religion" as a pretense to goodness or godliness.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *But It Is Not Authorized*

But the church of Jesus Christ is not authorized to preach

itself or to baptize into itself or to obey itself (vv. 18-20). Jesus does not authorize his disciples to play church! Why not, if “church” is the highest human aspiration and the very best in human achievement? Jesus’ answer, in his “Sermon on the Mount” (Matt. 5-7), cites “judgment” and “hell” and “fire” and “no reward” and “darkness” and “destruction” as the God-imposed end to those who carry on about religion as usual. With the advent of God’s kingdom and its proclamation of forgiveness, human religion is overturned as having exceeded its power to glorify God. Church and Religion, by pretending that it can accomplish even so much as a single godly act, blindly whistles in the dark while digging its own grave. Therefore no saving authority can be adduced to any human power. No wonder that some of the eleven remaining disciples “doubted” (v. 17)!

PROGNOSIS: Trusting Disciples

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Jesus’ Church Is Authorized*

In the history of the world, no religion has ever claimed that the authority for its existence has come through one who was dead; understandably so. But Jesus, crucified and risen (by God), does just that. The Son of God permitted himself to suffer our death-penalty for us, and was raised from the dead, by the same “authority” by which he forgives sin (9:6-8), the same authority that justifies his existence as the Son of God (3:13-17). With this “empowered authority” (Greek, *exousia*), received from God, Jesus in turn authorizes his disciples to become his “church”: not empowered by “flesh and blood” (16:16-20; John 1:13) but by God himself. Jesus’ church is fully authorized to proclaim the forgiveness of sin, in the name of God, that is, by the power of God. Jesus’ church has no other authority from him than this. As though to make certain that the disciples remain his church, and that we never confuse his power with ours, Jesus promised to be “with you always, to the end of

the age" (v. 20; that is, the age that will reach completion according to God's will). By looking to Jesus as their authority to forgive sins, the disciples of Jesus, and we his church, glorify God. Of this there is no doubt.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *By God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit)*

Religion, and we along with it, needs to die in order to recognize and receive the power of God to forgive sin. This means the church acknowledges that it can do nothing by our own authority. Crassly put, it means we shut up and listen. It means to live a "Sabbath" life, relying and depending on God to provide our every need. It means to be "baptized" (v. 19), immersed and drowned, into the promissory power of God. It means to receive the Holy Spirit, sent to us from the Father and the Son. In theological terms, it means a life of repentance and faith. Out with the old and in with the new. It means to stop playing church and let God, by the hidden power of forgiveness, reinvent us in the image of Christ. The only life authorized by Jesus is the one empowered by forgiveness. Everything else, without exception, is playing "church."

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *To Make Disciples among All Nations*

The counter-point to a church "playing church," is a church at prayer—a church receptive to the Holy Spirit's surprising creativity. Going out of our comfort zones and into the dens of our erstwhile enemies (that is, God's enemies), proclaiming the gospel and teaching by example what we ourselves have been taught by the Holy Spirit (vv. 19-20). Of course, the impulses of our old "church" do not die easily. But in this struggle we have the best company of all, Jesus the Christ. And as we are a church at prayer, the world will scarcely notice anything about us except that we are no longer playing its game. But if it does take notice, just imagine what it might see!