

Is Your Church Holy or Full of Holes?

>> **KEY VERSES:** Matthew 28:19-20

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

>> **IF YOU HAVE TIME, READ THIS:** Matthew 28

The Christian church is full of holes when it comes to holiness. Jesus commands us to obey his commands, and yet we usually dismiss the holiness altogether.

How do I know there is a hole in our holiness? Well, I don't. Who can possibly assess the state of the evangelical church or the church in North America, let alone the church around the globe? I could give you statistics about pastoral meltdowns or figures about the worldliness of the average churchgoer. You've probably seen them before and paid little attention. Anyone can say anything with statistics. Seventy-three percent of registered voters know that.

So I make no claim to have scientifically proven that Christians are neglecting the pursuit of holiness. But I'm not the first to think there is something missing in the contemporary church scene. In his book *Rediscovering Holiness*, J. I. Packer claims that present-day believers find holiness passé.¹ He cites three pieces of evidence: (1) We do not hear about holiness in preaching and books. (2) We do not insist upon holiness in our leaders. (3) We do not touch upon the need for personal holiness in our evangelism. These observations sound right to me.

But if you don't want to take Packer's word for it, think about these three diagnostic questions based on three passages of Scripture:

1. Is Our Obedience Known to All?

In most of Paul's letters he gives his churches a lot of encouragement. He usually begins by saying something like, "I'm so thankful for you. You guys are awesome. I think about you all the time, and when I do, it makes me praise God." He's a proud spiritual papa. But he wasn't passing out "My Christian is an honor roll saint at the Apostolic School for the Gifted" bumper stickers. He didn't have to. Others noticed for themselves. In Romans 16:19, for example, Paul says, "Everyone has heard about your obedience." Granted, reputations can be wrong (Rev. 3:1), and the Romans had their own issues to work out. But this commendation at the end of Romans forces us to ask the question: Is obedience what your church is known for? . . .

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2. Is Our Heaven a Holy Place?

In Revelation 21 we get a stunning glimpse of the new heaven and new earth. While most Christians are naturally curious about this recreated world, the Bible doesn't actually give a lot of specifics. But what we do know is what we really need to know. The new Jerusalem is glorious—it shines with the radiance of God's presence. The

new Jerusalem is safe—there is no more suffering, no more chaotic sea, and no more closed gates (because there are no more enemies). And most importantly for our purposes, the new Jerusalem is holy—not only has the bride been purified but the dimensions of the city suggest that heaven is a reconstituting of the Holy of Holies.

In some popular conceptions of the afterlife, God's love gets reduced to unconditional affirmation. But in truth, God's love is always a holy love and his heaven is an entirely holy place. Heaven is for those who conquer, for those who overcome the temptation to abandon Jesus Christ and compromise their faith (Rev. 21:7; see also Revelation 2–3). "But," Revelation 21:8 goes on to say, "the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death." No matter what you profess, if you show disregard for Christ by giving yourself over to sin—impenitently and habitually—then heaven is not your home . . .

3. Are We Great Commission Christians?

Here's a quick quiz: summarize the Great Commission Jesus gives at the end of Matthew 28. If you don't know what that is, go ahead and look it up. But if you know what I'm talking about, think of your two-sentence summary. Don't quote the verses; just put them in your own words. What does Jesus commission us to do in the Great Commission?

You may have said, "He sends us into the world to evangelize." Or maybe you said, "He wants us to preach the gospel to the nations." Or perhaps you said something about making disciples. Those aren't wrong answers. But do you recall Jesus' precise instructions? "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19–20a) . . . The Great Commission is about holiness. God wants the world to know Jesus, believe in Jesus, and obey Jesus. ■

Source: DeYoung, Kevin. *The Hole in Our Holiness: Filling the Gap between Gospel Passion and the Pursuit of Godliness*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012. Kindle edition. Kindle locations 128–184.

>> BRING IT TO LIFE:

The general consensus is that today's Christians are less holy and less obedient than ever before. Why do you think that is? What do you see in your own actions (or inaction) that is less than holy? Looking at the three points mentioned above, how can you help bring holiness and obedience back into Christ's church?

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1. J. I. Packer, *Rediscovering Holiness: Know the Fullness of Life with God* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2009), 31–32.

Are You the Spittin' Image of Jesus?

>> **KEY VERSES:** Luke 7:20

When the men came to Jesus, they said, "John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?'"

>> **IF YOU HAVE TIME, READ THIS:** Luke 7:18-35

People evaluate your faith and commitment to Jesus on what you leave behind you. What kind of trail are you leaving? Hypocrisy leaves a trail that others won't follow.

Remember when ole John the Baptizer sent his disciples to ask Jesus whether he was the one they were expecting and he didn't answer with a simple yes? Jesus instead told them to go tell John what they saw him doing. He knew that John could read the trail of crumbs. John knew that when lepers were healed, the blind saw, the dead rose, and the good news was preached to the poor, the one they were awaiting was indeed here.

What does our trail of crumbs look like? If someone asks if we are Christ-followers, can we say, "Tell me what you see"? Is there enough evidence to prove that we are taking after the slaughtered Lamb? What if they ask the poor around us? What if they ask our enemies? Would they say that we love them? Christians haven't always looked like Jesus. Perhaps the greatest barrier to Christ has been Christians who pronounce Jesus so loudly with their lips and deny him so loudly with their lives.¹

In the South, we have a saying: "You are the spittin' image" of someone. Folks still speculate over how exactly the phrase originated, but I've heard it put like this. It's shorthand for "spirit and image." Spittin' image. (Go ahead and try it out; it won't hurt.) For us, it meant more than just that you *look* like that person. It goes beyond just appearance to include character and temperament. It means that you remind people of that person. You have their charisma. You do the same things they did. In the truest sense, Christians are to be the spittin' image of Jesus in the world. We are to be the things he was. We are to preach the things he preached and live the way he lived. We are to follow in the footsteps of our rabbi so closely that we get his dust on us.

We are to remind the world of Jesus. The criterion for whether something is a manifestation of the kingdom of God is the person of Jesus. Does it look like him?

Source: Claiborne, Shane and Chris Haw. *Jesus for President*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009. Kindle edition. Kindle locations 2271-2284.

>> BRING IT TO LIFE:

Our faith requires us to be ambassadors for Christ and role models for his teachings. Do your actions resemble those of Jesus? Don't say one thing and then do the opposite. Walk the walk, so that others will follow your trail and they will be lead straight to Jesus.

A recent survey of young adults who are "familiar outsiders" to Christianity showed that the three most common perceptions of Christians by onlookers are that we are anti-homosexual (an image held by 91 percent of the folks surveyed), judgmental (87 percent), and hypocritical (85 percent). How sad that the very things Jesus scolded the religious elites around him for are the very things for which Christians are now known. We have a major image problem. To hear more about this study by the Barna research team, check out the book *Unchristian* (Baker, 2007) by our friends David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons.

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officers, "Take me away; I am badly wounded." ²⁴So they took him out of his chariot, put him in his other chariot and brought him to Jerusalem, where he died. He was buried in the tombs of his ancestors, and all Judah and Jerusalem mourned for him.

²⁵Jeremiah composed laments for Josiah, and to this day all the male and female singers commemorate Josiah in the laments. These became a tradition in Israel and are written in the Laments.

²⁶The other events of Josiah's reign and his acts of devotion in accordance with what is written in the Law of the LORD—²⁷all the events, from beginning to end, are written in **36** the book of the kings of Israel and Judah.¹ And the people of the land took Jehoahaz son of Josiah and made him king in Jerusalem in place of his father.

Jehoahaz King of Judah

²Jehoahaz^a was twenty-three years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem three months. ³The king of Egypt dethroned him in Jerusalem and imposed on Judah a levy of a hundred talents^b of silver and a talent^c of gold. ⁴The king of Egypt made Eliakim, a brother of Jehoahaz, king over Judah and Jerusalem and changed Eliakim's name to Jehoiakim. But Necho took Eliakim's brother Jehoahaz and carried him off to Egypt.

Jehoiakim King of Judah

⁵Jehoiakim was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem eleven years. He did evil in the eyes of the LORD his God. ⁶Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon attacked him and bound him with bronze shackles to take him to Babylon. ⁷Nebuchadnezzar also took to Babylon articles from the temple of the LORD and put them in his temple^d there.

⁸The other events of Jehoiakim's reign, the detestable things he did and all that was found against him, are written in the book of the kings of Israel and Judah. And Jehoiachin his son succeeded him as king.

Jehoiachin King of Judah

⁹Jehoiachin was eighteen^e years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusa-

lem three months and ten days. He did evil in the eyes of the LORD. ¹⁰In the spring, King Nebuchadnezzar sent for him and brought him to Babylon, together with articles of value from the temple of the LORD, and he made Jehoiachin's uncle,^f Zedekiah, king over Judah and Jerusalem.

Zedekiah King of Judah

¹¹Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem eleven years. ¹²He did evil in the eyes of the LORD his God and did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet, who spoke the word of the LORD. ¹³He also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar, who had made him take an oath in God's name. He became stiff-necked and hardened his heart and would not turn to the LORD, the God of Israel. ¹⁴Furthermore, all the leaders of the priests and the people became more and more unfaithful, following all the detestable practices of the nations and defiling the temple of the LORD, which he had consecrated in Jerusalem.

The Fall of Jerusalem

¹⁵The LORD, the God of their ancestors, sent word to them through his messengers again and again, because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling place. ¹⁶But they mocked God's messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the LORD was aroused against his people and there was no remedy. ¹⁷He brought up against them the king of the Babylonians,^g who killed their young men with the sword in the sanctuary, and did not spare young men or young women, the elderly or the infirm. God gave them all into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. ¹⁸He carried to Babylon all the articles from the temple of God, both large and small, and the treasures of the LORD's temple and the treasures of the king and his officials. ¹⁹They set fire to God's temple and broke down the wall of Jerusalem; they burned all the palaces and destroyed everything of value there.

²⁰He carried into exile to Babylon the remnant, who escaped from the sword, and

^a 2 Hebrew *Joahaz*, a variant of *Jehoahaz*; also in verse 4 ^b 3 That is, about 3 3/4 tons or about 3.4 metric tons ^c 3 That is, about 75 pounds or about 34 kilograms ^d 7 Or *palace* ^e 9 One Hebrew manuscript, some Septuagint manuscripts and Syriac (see also 2 Kings 24:8); most Hebrew manuscripts *eight* ^f 10 Hebrew *brother*, that is, relative (see 2 Kings 24:17) ^g 17 Or *Chaldeans*

“Living together can help you avoid big trouble down the road.”

know what the Bible says. I've heard the sermons and listened to all kinds of statistics.

But here are some other things that are true:

1. My parents went through a nasty divorce and so did Lindsey's.
2. Those break-ups were awful for everybody—especially the kids.
3. One of the reasons both sets of parents broke up was because they didn't know each other well enough. My parents got married when they were really young, not even twenty years old. Lindsey's mom and dad did the long-distance dating thing, which meant they only saw each other in a kind of unrealistic light—on weekends and never day-to-day.
4. Once you say your vows, it's supposed to be final.

Given all those facts, doesn't it make sense that we'd better be pretty dog-gone sure before we pull the trigger?

I know a lot of Christians say that this is all a smokescreen . . . that the real reason we're thinking about living together is just to have sex. And I admit, that is a big temptation. But Lindsey and I have sexual temptation now—already—and we're not living together. It's not as if that isn't already in our face.

I'm aware that the Bible says no sex until marriage. I also don't know too many people who have kept that rule. A few, I guess. I know of one couple, good friends of mine, who did wait. And now they have had some pretty severe sexual issues. My guess is that if you asked, “If you had known all this beforehand, would you still have gone ahead and married each other?” they would probably say no.

—Spencer

On the face of it, arguments like Spencer's seem to make a lot of common sense. Who would deny that a failed marriage leaves painful scars that never fully heal? And in countless daily decisions, don't we try things out? We test-drive a certain car, try on shoes to make sure they fit, even sample ice cream before ordering a whole scoop. If we do such careful research before making everyday choices, surely we should be extra cautious before making what is supposed to be a “for life” decision. How can you approach this issue?

Remember that God always has your best interests in mind. He is not out to make your life miserable. In fact, his way of approaching dating and marriage is ultimately the most fulfilling way.

Rely on Biblical principles for approaching the whole marital muddle. For instance, the Bible calls on Christians to marry only those with similar beliefs (see 2 Corinthians 6:14–16). That one standard limits the pool of potential mates (and mismatches) drastically.

Let your standards be set by the Word of God, not the pattern of the world. Sexual purity before marriage (see 1 Thessalonians 4:1–8) and sexual fidelity after marriage (see Matthew 5:27–32) are God's indisputable standards.

Reflect on creative options. Rather than “shacking up” to see if they are compatible, a couple might join a small Bible study group with older, more mature Christians, and discuss the topic of marriage. Starry-eyed couples could thus get a truer picture of what marriage involves.

Invest in premarital counseling, either with a trained therapist or with a trusted older couple, who can help uncover and resolve potential problem areas.

When it comes to marriage, there are no “sure bets.” If you're looking for an ironclad guarantee that it is possible to find out everything about someone before making a commitment, you're dreaming. Marriage is a risky proposition. It takes faith. And lots of hard work.

It comes down to this: Do you trust God? Do you believe his plan (living together only after marriage) is best? And are you willing to follow his plan, even if the whole world embraces a different way?

“Co-habitation increases the likelihood of divorce. America has been an experimental, experience-driven culture. Given that tendency, we can expect America to retain the highest divorce rate among all developed nations of the world.”

—George Barna

SEE ALSO

- Song of Songs 2:7
- 1 Corinthians 6:18–20
- 1 Thessalonians 4:3–8

For more on Cohabitation, check the index.

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