

Love Jesus, Hate Religion

Acts 2:32-37; Romans 12:4-13

4th Sunday in Epiphany

29 January 2012

One of the new catch phrases that the Internet has brought into the English language is, “To go viral.” It refers, of course, to a YouTube video that spreads like a virus as people pass it on to their friends through social media or by email. These videos share life and laughter, lead to Justin Bieber-like success, but can also bring much embarrassment.

Last summer, when the Dalai Lama was visiting Australia, he was interviewed on *The Today Show* and the host, Karl Stefanovic, decided he would tell the great Tibetan leader a joke.

“So,” Stefanovic began, “the Dalai Lama walks into a pizza shop.” At that point the Dalai Lama looked puzzled and turned towards his interpreter, asking with a quizzical look on his face, “Pizza? Pizza Shop?” The interpreter explained and, when Stefanovic thought his guest understood, he continued, “So the Dalai Lama walks into a pizza shop and asks: Can you make me one with everything?” Still looking puzzled, the Dalai Lama asks, “What’s that?” Laughing, Stefanovic puts his hands together in a prayerful pose and repeats the punch line a couple of times, “Can you make me one with everything?” But all to no avail. Finally, Stefanovic puts his hands over his face in embarrassment and apologises. Despite this, the video clip went viral and this poor man’s faux pas instantly became known worldwide.¹

Apart from inflicting embarrassment or paving the way to success, some viral videos actually get people talking about serious and, even, controversial issues.

One such video that has recently gone viral is entitled “Why I hate religion but love Jesus” and was uploaded by Jefferson Bethke, a young 22 year old evangelical Christian from Tacoma, Washington, who was trying to take a shot at organised religion’s legalism, self-righteousness and self-justification. The video is filled with rap-type rhymes such as: “Because the problem with religion is that it never gets to the core, It’s just behavior modification, like just another chore.”²

Though Bethke has said that he was not really targeting the church, there are many who have seized on it as a pretext for doing just that. “I love

Jesus,” they say, “but I hate the church.” I hate the organised church because of all the wars that it has spawned, because of its elitism and power, its threats and judgmentalism. I hate the church because people aren’t spiritual like me. And so it goes on.

Appearing on CBS’s *This Morning* show last Monday morning, Bethke was taken to task by a Roman Catholic priest, Rev. Edward Beck who suggested to him that he had made a false dichotomy by trying to divide Jesus and religion, or Jesus and the church, and set them over against one another. “Hate”, said Father Beck, “is a strong word and, using it in reference to religion can put all of Christianity in a bad light.” Then lapsing into the Bethke’s kind of rap-speak, “Yo, Jeff, let me give you a holla from the collar. I don’t think it’s religion you should be dissin’, I think it’s the nuance that you’re missin’.”³

And the good priest was right. You can’t set Jesus over against religion, if by religion you mean the Church. You can’t love Jesus and not love his Church. The two are inseparable. The Church is the Bride of Christ.⁴ You can’t love Jesus without loving the one who is so dear to him. The Church is the Body of Christ.⁵ You can’t love Christ without loving his body. That would be like a man saying to a woman he cares about, “I love your head but I really don’t care for the rest of your body.” One is an integral part of another. Like the horse and cart, you can’t have one without the other.

I remember hearing from a friend about a church where there had been some conflict between a few members and the minister. One of the dissidents, trying to ingratiate himself with the minister’s wife, said to her, “We like you, but we hate your husband.” And she replied, “Then you must hate me also because my husband and I can’t be separated. We are part of one another. Love me, love my husband. Hate my husband, hate me.” And that’s the way it is with Christ and his Church. They are so interwoven that you can’t separate them.

Now granted that sometimes it is difficult to love the church because some people in the church do stupid things, they do bad things, they do immoral things, they do hypocritical things, they do

unspiritual things. But look at it this way. Which of us, as parents – if we have a son or a daughter who goes astray, who gets in with bad company, who drops out of school, who parties too much, who thumbs their nose at authority – which of us would stop loving that child? Which of us would stop trying to help that child or to steer them in the right way, or would hesitate to put our arms around them and accept them back like the father of The Prodigal Son? No self-respecting parent would refrain from doing that. Neither should we refuse to do it with the church. We continue to love it, believe in it, support it and pray for it despite its faults and failings. And we do this because it is the Bride of Christ. The Body of Christ. It is one and the same with him who is our Lord and Saviour. If we love one, we have to love the other.

Over the years of my ministry, I must confess that, far from becoming more disillusioned with the church, I have grown in love for it. I have grown in love for it because I have seen, first hand, the change that it has brought to so many people's lives. Mediating Christ to them through worship and fellowship. Giving them hope when all has seemed lost. Giving them guidance when they had lost their way. Giving them forgiveness when filled with guilt. Giving them acceptance when others rejected them.

I love the church for the way it engages people and helps them on an individual basis. But I also love the way the church acts in a collective, focused way. Many people say they hate the organised church but I love the church especially because it is organised. This is the way the church was meant to be right from the very beginning Didn't Jesus organise twelve disciples and organise them to undertake their mission in Galilee? Wasn't the early church, the church of Peter and James, organised from a very early stage, with bishops, elders and deacons, local meetings and general assemblies?⁶ Paul's vision of the church also involved organisation. Similar to the human body. "We have many parts in one body and all these parts have different functions. We are one body in union with Christ, and we are all joined to each other as different parts of one body."⁷

Now, the early Christians knew instinctively why they had to be organised. So they could live out their inner spirituality. So they could show Christ's love by caring for the needy. So they could serve

others most effectively. They had to be organised to serve. The passage from Acts 4 – about the believers sharing their possessions – reveals just how organised the church at Jerusalem was in these earliest times. So they could properly deliver the practical Christianity that was the outworking of their inner spirituality.⁸

Today, in the 21st century, the church of Jesus Christ is much more highly organised than ever. And while many denigrate the church on this account, I love it because it is only through this organisation that Christians can fulfil their Master's command to care for the needy throughout the world.

I love the church of Jesus Christ because it is ready to serve others in distress at the drop of a hat. When the tornados hit Joplin, Missouri, last May, who were first there to offer help and support? The local churches. When the devastating earthquake hit Haiti in January 2010, again it was agencies of the global church, like Caritas International⁹, ACT Alliance¹⁰ and Presbyterian World Service and Development, that were among the very first respondents on the ground.

I love not only the global church but I love The Presbyterian Church. I love it because of the way it brings clergy and lay people, men and women, together as equal partners in service and in decision-making. I love it because of its inclusiveness of all peoples regardless of ethnic background or culture or colour or sexual orientation. I love it because of the openness of its sacraments to all who love the Lord Jesus Christ. I love it because of the centrality of the Bible, the soundness of its theology, and its commitment to faith and reason. I love it because it is opposed to fundamentalism and literalism. I love it because of its moderation in all things and its practise of doing everything decently and in order. I love the Presbyterian Church.

I also love St. Paul's. I loved it from the moment I first set foot in here 25/26 years ago. I love it because of the way it has changed and developed over the years. I love it because it is a distinctively Presbyterian Church. Not a non-denominational community church that has sacrificed its true identity in order to be successful by being all things to all people. But one that has been, and I hope always will be, committed to retaining its Presbyterian heritage at all costs.

I love St. Paul's because I see Christ in so many

of its peoples both young and old. I love it because of its strong leadership by faith-filled people. I love it because of the buzz that pervades the welcome and coffee times. I love it because of its music that enriches our worship week by week. I love it because of its children, their faith, their liveliness, their laughter. I love St. Paul's because of the way it proclaims the gospel in the daily lives of its people as well as publicly through Bethlehem Live. I love it because of its commitment to serving the needy through the community dinners and its hosting of so many social justice and poverty groups.

I love this building in which, week after week, we gain a unique experience of the presence of Jesus Christ. I love the building because of its beauty, its stained glass windows, the Christian emblems on the walls, its history, the memories it holds of members no longer with us, of baptisms, weddings and funerals. I love St. Paul's because it is not a modern building but is old and imperfect, and feels like putting on an old pair of shoes or a comfortable sweater every time one comes in.

I love St. Paul's because of its location and its wonderful platform for mission right at the centre of the city. I love St. Paul's because, despite the challenges it has faced over the years, it carries within it – and within its people – the seeds of a great and exciting future.

I know that so many of you here today would also agree that you love this church. I would say to you continue to love it. But love it even more by increasing your presence at worship, by upping your involvement in its life and work, by giving even more generous donations, by constantly offering your prayerful support of the Session and Interim Moderator during the time of vacancy and, in time, by welcoming and embracing warmly in Christian love, the minister whom you will one day call to serve here.

Love Christ and hate the church? No! Love Christ and love his church. Love it globally, denominationally and locally. And love it even more so that, in days ahead, it will become an even greater and stronger servant of Christ's kingdom.

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¹ Lynn Curwin, "Video of newscaster-Dalai Lama joke goes viral", Digital Journal, <http://digitaljournal.com/article/308031>

² Jefferson Bethke, "Why I Hate Religion, But Love Jesus," YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIAhDGYlpqY>

³ Nicola Menzie, "Hate Religion, Love Jesus' Poet Jefferson Bethke Takes Jesus Center Stage", Christian Post Report, 23 January 2012, <http://global.christianpost.com/news/hate-religion-love-jesus-poet-jefferson-bethke-takes-jesus-center-stage-67747/>

⁴ Ephesians 5:22-23

⁵ 1 Corinthians 12:12

⁶ Acts 15

⁷ Romans 12:4ff

⁸ Acts 4:32ff

⁹ Relief agency of the Roman Catholic Church

¹⁰ ACT Alliance is an alliance of 125 churches worldwide, including The Presbyterian Church in Canada, that act together in humanitarian assistance, advocacy and development. <http://www.actalliance.org>