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Spotlight: The Spirituality of Jesus as a Calling, Part I

JULY 12, 2017 by PAUL ANDERSON, PROFESSOR OF BIBLICAL AND QUAKER STUDIES, GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

Note: This article spotlights the work of Paul Anderson, an [individual faculty partner](#) in the Oikonomia Network. [See Part II of this series here.](#)

Several years ago, Dan Kimball came out with a book entitled *They Like Jesus But Not the Church*. While American culture has grown less impressed with institutions, people still report profound interest in authentic spirituality. This is especially true of young adults.

The church often fails to pique young people's interest because we fail to focus on the real thing – Jesus Christ. The life and teachings of Jesus, however, convey a contagious passion for authentic spirituality, and an inclusive quest for Jesus points to a way forward.

An inclusive quest for Jesus involves us in a calling that extends beyond the confines of the Christian movement. The spirituality of Jesus is experienced in a special way in the church community, but also calls us out of it, to the world around us.

While theological terminology has been important in dividing truth from error within

church discussions, the language often seems irrelevant, or even off-putting, to those outside the church. For the “nones” (those who write “none” on surveys reporting their religious affiliation), the personal issues of community, grace, love, relationship, honesty, integrity and forgiveness speak louder than doctrinal platforms or markers of orthodoxy.

This is not to say that right thinking (the meaning of “orthodoxy”) is unimportant. It is to say that relationships are key, and that right living (orthopraxy) says more about the heart of one’s faith than the planks of theological platforms. Ironically, even our systems of inclusion can be experienced as walls of exclusion by others, and remembering this helps the church discern how to be salt and light in the world.

Therefore, the church that emphasizes community and fellowship – creating warm and inviting contexts for people to feel the love of God through persons of faith – will be healing and inviting for beloved friends and neighbors. Likewise, when authentic worship becomes a place where people express their love for God and receive God’s love for them, transformation happens. Grace and empowerment become real, and the Holy Spirit touches the places in our lives in need of healing and restoration.

As Christ promised to be present in the community of faith wherever two or three are gathered in his name (Matthew 18:18-20), the calling of the church is to be a sacramental context for experiencing the real presence of Christ through fellowship.

This is what it means to be a sacramental community of faith. The Latin word *sacramentum* is a translation of the Greek word *mysterion*, and in the New Testament, God’s sacramental mystery is never equated with any particular rite or symbol of spiritual reality. Rather, the great mystery of the ages, revealed finally through the New Covenant with Christ Jesus, is that the boundaries between people groups – Jews and Gentiles, males and females, slaves and free – are transcended by the priestly bridgework of God (Romans 11:24-27 and 16:25-26; Galatians 3:28; I Corinthians 2:6-10; Ephesians 3:6 and Colossians 1:24-26).

In the saving work of Christ, all walls between individuals and groups are transcended, and the blessings availed to the families of Abraham are now extended to the world: a gift of grace received through faith.

But how is it known that we are followers of Jesus? That we have love for one another (John 13:35). How is the loving presence of Christ felt by seekers today? As it was on the dusty road to Emmaus, the presence of the risen Lord will be felt in the breaking of bread and traveling the road together (Luke 24:30-32 and Acts 2:42).

Therefore, the high calling of the church is not to build itself up as an isolated social space behind high walls, but to be salt and light in the world, whereby people become homesick for a spiritual relationship with God because of the sacramental contagion of feeling its authentic reality in the lives of believers.

As Robert Barclay put it in his *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*:

Not by strength of arguments...came [I] to receive and bear witness of the Truth, but by being secretly reached by Life. For, when I came into the silent assemblies of God's people, I felt a secret power among them, which touched my heart; and as I gave way unto it I found the evil weakening in me and the good raised up; and so I became thus knit and united unto them, hungering more and more after the increase of this power and life whereby I might feel myself perfectly redeemed; and indeed this is the surest way to become a Christian.

Part II of this article will appear next month.