

Control Freaks and God

The surest way to know something is not of God is to ask the question, "Is there a control freak in the house?" God is not into controlling us, nor does he want us to control others. A cult is an organization that is easy to enter but difficult to leave because of the guilt and shame associated with disobeying the leadership in departing. An organization, or leader, is strong and benevolent to the degree it empowers and encourages you, and makes it clear that you are free to leave any time you would like to go. No one in the world did this better than Jesus of Nazareth. Time and time again, he told his disciples they were free to follow him or free to go. It was their choice, no one else's.

This attitude should be in the heart of all who call themselves followers of Jesus. Many people I know in churches get all hung up when it comes to discussing evangelism, our calling to be a witness to the grace of our Lord in the world.

Evangelism makes many people feel awkward because they do not want to be accused of being forceful, presumptuous, paternalistic, or even imperialistic in sharing their belief in Jesus. But they forget that Jesus never forced himself or his beliefs on others. On the contrary. He went about his business of serving the poor, healing the sick, liberating captives, and teaching and giving sermons. People were free to



attend, or not. We should do the same; going about the business of serving and loving others, and ready to explain the hope that is within us as the Spirit moves. Our job is to help people gain access to the life of Jesus, then let them decide to follow or not.

When I was in seminary, I was in a small group where there were two people who had recovered from being in a cult before they discovered their true freedom in Christ. One man was formerly a member of the Church of Scientology, and the other came from a Mormon background. Both of them explained how their former religions kept challenging them to take one step further into increasing privileges of its membership. They described feelings of being led into darker and darker places with intense expectations of what was required of a true member. Gaining privileges to inner sanctums, higher levels of spirituality, leadership positions and even their own planets after death became their focus. They said they became more captive than free.

But that is true of any religion that rejects the radical freedom of the new covenant, which Jesus came to earth to embody and teach. People are constantly tempted to

either add or subtract to the teachings of Jesus in order to exercise control over other people. They even invent new religions, which they basically call Christian, but with significant new twists in theology, as if the teaching of Jesus was not enough by itself. After all, it takes tremendous strength to let Jesus be the Lord of our lives; let him be king, judge of the world, head of the Church, and resist the temptation to add or subtract from anything he taught us.

"Apparently, life within the ISIS community is as close to hell on earth as one can get."

Don't let anyone tell you that ISIS, the Taliban, or Boko Haram are not being driven by theology. Some of its key leaders are sincere theologians who say they believe with all their hearts that they are beheading, burning, and killing people in the name of God, and for the purposes of pleasing God. For these reasons, they are systematically killing many Christians, Jews - and Muslims, too - anyone who disagrees with them. Of course, the vast majority of Muslims worldwide disagree vehemently with these militant, fundamentalist and extreme interpretations of their Quran. Yet, these militant Muslims continue to wreak havoc in the world today. The theological leader of ISIS, Al-Baghdadi, obtained his PhD in Islam from Baghdad University. Thus, within Islam today, there is tremendous disagreement among the many different Muslim sects worldwide, Sunni versus Shiite, moderate versus conservative, Wahhabism versus Sufi, to name just a few.

Apparently, life within the ISIS community is as close to hell on earth as one can get. Media today is quick to report that disenfranchised youth from Canada, United States, Europe and Africa are being recruited via the Internet for military service in Syria, Libya, Iraq, Yemen and other countries. But, what we are now hearing about are the hundreds of young people who are managing to escape the controlling grip of ISIS. The stories they tell are harrowing. ISIS leadership is executing any of its own members who show even the slightest tendency of disagreeing with the commands of Al-Baghdadi and his appointed spiritual and military leaders. Every detail of life in an ISIS community is controlled by its leaders, and hateful religion is often taught on a daily basis. It is one of the worst cults the world has ever seen.

When I was in Egypt last fall, ISIS had officially declared war on Egypt. Now, frequent military confrontations are taking place in the Sinai Desert between ISIS and Egyptian forces. On January 1st of this year, President Sisi of Egypt went before the leadership of Al-Azhar University, and made one of the most significant speeches in recent Muslim history. Al-Azhar University trains more Sunni imams or spiritual leaders than any other university or theological school



President Sisi of Egypt

in the world. President Sisi implored the university leaders and professors to be champions of a reformation of the Sunni Muslim faith. In saying so, President Sisi represents the millions of more moderate Muslims worldwide, who are appalled at the extremist tendencies of militant Muslims. In recent years, nearly five million Egyptian Muslims have chosen to become atheists rather than stay with a religion that they perceive teaches violence and bloodshed.

My heart sank earlier this week when I read the stories about the new branch of ISIS in Libya that led 25 innocent Egyptian Orthodox Coptic men to slaughter with a mass beheading ceremony. President Sisi called for a seven-day period of national prayer, which is taking place as you read this message. Christian leaders in Egypt are reminding people how many martyrs over the years have suffered as Jesus did at his own unjust crucifixion; that the murder of these innocent men will not be in vain. The blood of martyrs' is often the seed of the growing Church, Egyptian Christian leaders are reminding people. On Monday, Pope Francis departed from a formal address before the Church of Scotland to say, "Their (the martyrs in Libya) only words were, 'Jesus, help me!'. They were killed simply for the fact they were Christians...The blood of our Christian brothers and sisters is a testimony which cries out to be heard...It makes no difference whether they be Catholic, Orthodox, Copts or Protestants. They are all Christians! The martyrs belong to all Christians."

Millions of moderate Muslims in Egypt are wailing and lamenting with their Christian friends. ISIS is causing Muslims to reexamine the claims and ultimate theology of their faith more than anything else in modern history. Please pray for the thousands, if not millions, of Muslims who are still under the control of ISIS, but who are trying to escape with their lives.

All that should control us is the love of God. Humans should not control each other; we are called to serve one another unconditionally with the love of God in our hearts. ISIS, the Taliban, and Boko Haram have a false and deadly understanding of God. They live and die by the letter of their own law. God went through great lengths to usher in his new covenant. He sent his son to live amongst us and die for our sins. God wants all people to live by the grace Jesus Christ has provided for us, not by the law. This world needs to know what treasure it has in gaining access to the new covenant of God, Jesus Christ.



Sometimes it drove the disciples mad when Jesus told them they were free to come or go. He was not going to control them. At times, the faith requirements of Jesus became very demanding for his followers. They could not believe how much their lives needed to change in order to become born from above and transformed into a

person of grace. In the sixth chapter of John, some followers of Jesus decided his teachings were too hard and they wanted to go back to their own ways. Verse 66 says; "At this point many of his disciples turned away and deserted him. Then Jesus turned to the Twelve and asked, 'Are you also going to leave?' Simon Peter replied, 'Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words that give eternal life. We believe, and we know you are the Holy One of God.'" We follow Jesus only because we choose to, not because we are forced. The grace and love of God sets our souls free. God wants us to be free, self-governed only by the requirements of love, the Holy Spirit, and the righteous requirements of the new covenant. Later in Chapter Eight of John, it is written in verses 31 and 32; "Jesus said to the people who believed in him, 'You are truly my disciples if you remain faithful to my teachings. And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.'"

Why people are tempted to add or subtract from the teachings of Jesus, I will never know. He is the Alpha and the Omega. He is the last prophet, high priest, king of the world, creator of the universe, and savior of our souls. Any attempt to supplement what Jesus has already told us will always fail. It will invariably lead to frustration, captivity, fear, anger, and even uncontrolled violence if it gets out of hand. All we need to do is surrender to the loving grace of God to be free.



May you have a most blessed Lenten season. Let us walk with our own cross, next to Jesus, ready to be resurrected and reborn as was he.