

## APOSTLES ANONYMOUS

Scriptures: Mark 9:38-41; Acts 19:11-20

Recently I was given a book called *Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim Road* about a Syrian writer named Mazhar Mallouhi. As a boy Mazhar was sent to a Muslim school where he studied the Qur'an in order to become a Muslim cleric. But along the way he became depressed about the suffering in the world and in his own life. In the Qur'an he learned about the absolute sovereignty and holiness of God, but he came to feel that God was so far above us, so beyond us, as to have no part in our daily struggles. As he said later, "God had given me a book, but had walked out of my life" (p. 22).

So Mazhar began reading about other religions, including Hinduism. This led him to the writings of a Hindu named Mahatma Gandhi. Mazhar was fascinated by Gandhi, especially how Gandhi's used non-violent resistance to defeat the British Empire and bring independence to India. Then he discovered that Gandhi got these ideas from reading about the life of Jesus. So Mazhar borrowed a Christian Bible from a Syrian army officer who happened to be Presbyterian. I am not making this up. In one year Mazhar read the Old Testament thirteen times and the New Testament twenty-seven times. He later said of this experience,

I saw a difference between this Christ that I was reading about in the Gospels and other religious leaders. Christ combined his teaching with his lifestyle. He didn't just give me an ideal, but he showed me how to live by living it for me, and he promised that I could begin life anew (pp. 22-23).

Basically, Mazhar was a Muslim who became a Christian thanks to a Hindu who got him reading about Jesus.

Keep that story in mind as we turn back with me to our second scripture lesson: Mark chapter 9, beginning at verse 38. One of Jesus' followers named John was upset. He said to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he was not following us."

I must confess that I would have felt the same way as John. When I hear of a self-appointed minister starting some new mega-church or some multi-million dollar television ministry, I tend react something like this. I say, "Well, what seminary did he go to? (It is usually a "he.") What theological exams did he pass? What recognized church body ordained him?" Basically, I am asking the same question as John: "What right does this guy have to start some successful new ministry that has not been approved by the rest of us?"

I suspect that these questions are motivated by more than theology. Earlier in Mark 9 a distraught father asks Jesus to cast out a demon from his son. He says to Jesus, "I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so." Isn't that interesting? Early in chapter 9 the disciples are unable to cast out a demon. Later in the same chapter when they see someone who do it who does not belong to their group they are miffed. Do you detect whiff of jealousy here?

I do, but I would not admit to it. No, I would grab my Bible and turn to our first scripture lesson. In Acts 19 seven sons of a Jewish high priest try to cast out demons using the name of Jesus. But the demons reply, “Jesus I know and Paul I know; but who are you?” That is my question. Who are you to think you can go around doing ministry in the name of Jesus without belonging to our group, without going through the proper training and screening that is required for ordination? There are quacks in ministry just like in medicine, and you have to be careful about whom you let in? That is how John sees it, and I would tend to agree.

But that does not seem to bother Jesus. Jesus says, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.” To Jesus it is more important that we serve him by ministering to others in his name than that we belong to a certain group. As he says to the disciples, “Those who are not against us are for us.” It is possible for a Muslim to become a Christian through a Hindu, if that Hindu is learning about and trying to follow Jesus.

That does not mean that anyone who uses Jesus’ name is necessarily serving Jesus. In Acts 19 the sons of the Jewish high priest are trying to cast out demons using Jesus’ name, but they are not really trying to serve Jesus. If you notice, they said to the demons, “I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims.” They were not really trying to serve Jesus, they were trying to acquire for themselves the kind of power Paul has. They were using the name of Jesus to enhance their own reputations as miracle workers.

There are self-appointed ministers of mega-churches and TV ministries who do the same thing. They use the name of Jesus to get rich, to acquire status and power, to finance an opulent lifestyle. I think we are right to question ministers like that. But there are also many humble servants of Jesus laboring as anonymous apostles. They don’t belong to our churches; they may not even identify with our religion. But they are out there trying to help others in the name of Jesus, and Jesus tells us to welcome them and to work with them not against them.

In verse 41 Jesus gives this whole issue a final new twist. He says, “For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.” Notice how this is worded. Jesus does not say, “If *you* give a cup of water to another person in my name, you will receive a reward.” He does not talk about what we do. He says, “If anyone else gives you a cup of water in my name, that person will not lose his or her reward.”

In the book *Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim Road*, Mazhar frequently mentions the importance of hospitality in Middle Eastern culture. But his point is the opposite of what you would expect. He does not emphasize how Christians should show hospitality toward Muslim people. He encourages that, of course, but that is not his main point. Instead he encourages Christians to become *guests* of Muslim people, to be recipients of hospitality and not just givers of hospitality.

More often than not, that is what Jesus did. When Jesus met a Samaritan woman at a well, he did not give her a drink of water from the well, he asked for one. When Jesus met a tax collector named Zacchaeus, he did not invite Zacchaeus to his own home, he asked if he could

come to Zacchaeus' home. There are a few times, like the story of Jesus feeding 5000 people, where Jesus acts as the host. But most of the time Jesus is the guest at someone else's table.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus does that? Because allowing someone else to serve us in the name of Christ can draw us both closer to Jesus than if we always do the serving.

As I have mentioned before, on Wednesday mornings I go down to the House of Charity to lead a 30 or 40 minute Bible reading and prayer time in their chapel. Sometimes no one shows up, which is itself a valuable lesson in humility. It reminds me that I am not God's gift to ministry, that if any of you at all show up here on Sunday mornings or Wednesday nights, it is purely by God's grace. But sometimes a few people show up, and then we read a Bible passage and pray for each other. We go around the circle and each of us shares one or two things for which we would most like prayer. Then each person prays for the person on his or her right. Sometimes people in the group are reluctant to do this. But I point out that they are not praying for their own sake but for the sake of the person next to them.

A few months ago there was a guy sitting next to me on my left who said he had never prayed out loud before. In fact the idea of praying at all was kind of new to him. But I told him that I really needed him to pray for me that week. I asked him to pray for me as I work with people in the church whose marriages were struggling. He got this real concerned look on his face, like he knew what I was talking about. I don't know if he had ever been married, but he looked like he knew what it was like to struggle in a relationship. So he said he would try, and we started around the circle to my right. As each person ahead of him prayed, he sort of got the idea of praying, that you can actually talk to God just like you talk to a person. Then it was his turn, and he started praying for me as I work with couples in our church. It was a prayer like I had never heard before. He told God how painful it was when people fought with each other and hurt each other. The anguish in his voice was almost palpable. Then in the most sincere and eloquent words I have ever heard he begged God to help me do a good job as a minister. He practically pleaded with God to show me how to help people and love people and stick with them even when things weren't going well. When he finished he said, "That's all I can think to say," and the rest of us said, "Amen."

Interestingly, this guy came back to the chapel the next week. People do not often come to the chapel service at House of Charity two weeks in a row. They are too transient. But this guy came back the next week. He said he wanted to pray again.

There is no better way to help people outside the church grow closer to Jesus than by letting them serve you and by letting them serve with you to do something for others in the name of Christ.

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