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John Crosby
I'm Spiritual. Why Do I Need the Church?
Acts 2:42-47 & Hebrews 10:25

I was trying to take a break the other day. I was over at the chipping green at a local course and Jeff came up. I sort of know him. It's one of those things where his wife and my wife are friends and we've met, but I don't really know him well. He comes up and says, "I'm Jeff. I'm a doctor and my wife says you're a pastor." I can already tell where this is going. But he fooled me. He said, "Everybody who knows that I'm a doctor, wherever I am, in a store or out here on the course, people come up and say, 'Hey, I've got this rash' or 'My knees really ache.'" And he said to me, "Has that ever happened to you? Do every have somebody come up and ask you about the meaning of life when you're practicing that 4-foot put that you never seem to make, by the way?" We laughed and I said, "Usually when people discover what I do, two things happen. First, their language changes a little, but second, they don't go, 'Oh, oh, ohhhh.'" They go, "Oh, that's great. That's great that you do that. I suppose I'd say that I'm spiritual but I'm not really religious. I don't see how church helps me to know God better." Then they look at me like I'm supposed to be the one to defend all churches everywhere.

I don't go up to a math teacher and say, "Oh, boy, I hate calculus." I don't go up to a chef and say, "Oh, boy, I hate asparagus." I would go up to a clown and say, "Clowns scare me. Please go away." But that's a different illustration. Often I think people want to see themselves as spiritual but not religious and I think that comes, frankly, from mistrust or a pain that they have experienced in their past or even a dislike of organized religion. They associate it with joining or attending churches, following rituals, being subjected to non-negotiable moral commandments or beliefs, even political perspectives. Many have come to see the church as toxic or self-serving. These good folks, and they are good folks, are more likely to see themselves on an individual spiritual path, an individual spiritual journey, one that allows them, frankly, to discover and pick and choose from the array of spiritual offerings in our world, whether that's from traditional religions of the East or the West, from New Age earth-centered philosophies, or even a mash-up of what they believe - a spirituality of their own design. That sounds a lot like these people who come up to me and say, "I'm spiritual but I'm not religious."

We've been talking about questions that people are asking and saying, "How would you answer these?" and trying to make it a little more like a dialogue back and forth. So, what I'd like to do is pretend that somebody came up and said, "I'm spiritual. Why do I have to go to church? I'm not religious. Why do I have to go to church?" I'd start with, what's the difference between religion and spirituality? Religion is easier, right? There are the three great monotheistic religions, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, the Abrahamic heritage. There are the religious systems of the East, Hinduism, Buddhism, the Tao, Shinto, and thousands and thousands of varieties of all of that. What these have in common is that religions are all belief systems about the Divine, usually accompanied by specific rituals and practices. That's a religion. Easy enough. But many among

the 40 percent of the United States population who do not attend worship on anything like a regular basis describe themselves as spiritual but not religious.

This term seems to have come out of the alcoholics movement. Somewhere in the 1970s, Alcoholics Anonymous was trying to explain that even though they profoundly believe belief in a higher power is essential, required in the 12 Steps, a strict orthodox view of any specific god is not required. It's never been an officially adopted line of Alcoholics Anonymous, but *spiritual but not religious* has spread like wildfire through our culture.

Spirituality thinks there is something bigger out there, something higher, something spiritual in us and in our world, but many of our spiritual folks don't think that religion quite captures it. Religion tries to get it, but they put it in a box or they even abuse that search. Even the folks who don't believe in God would say that there is more to life than what they can see. There is a prominent new atheist, Sam Harris, who says, "Our world is dangerously riven by religious doctrines that all educated people should condemn." But he adds, "There is more to understanding the human condition than science and secular culture generally admit." Even atheists long for a sense of spirituality because we are all on a search for something. It seems hardwired in to the human genome that there is more.

So I want to start with this friend who is asking me the question and say that I don't think *spiritual but not religious* is an either-or situation. I don't think it's spirituality versus religion. And then I'd say that I'm not that crazy about religion myself. I don't want to defend religion. I'd point to the history of the abuse of religion from the Crusades, to the justification for the Ku Klux Klan, to the present day jihads and intifadas and talk about the abuse of religion when it gets its hands on power. I'd say, we can agree on that, right? I'd say, regardless of what you think about spirituality and religion, the worst possible combination is religion without spirituality. Those are Jesus' harshest words, right? The Pharisees have decided what God looked like and anything outside of their narrow box could not be God. Jesus' harshest words are for people who have said, "Religion is more important than spirituality." He called them *whitewashed tombs*.

So what I'd do with my friend who says, "I'm spiritual but I'm not religious," I'd try to start by building that as common ground. I'd say that spirituality and Christianity, not spirituality and religion, spirituality and Christianity have a lot in common. We both believe that all truth is God's truth and there's a lot of truth, a lotta, lotta truth, that none of the religions of the world understand. We all have so much to learn from each other and if all truth is God's truth, we don't have to be worried about where it comes from.

I'd say that the spiritual folks and the Christian folks agree that there is a moral code hardwired somehow into the universe. There is a Right with a capital R and a Wrong with a capital W. It's not something I'm making up. It's something I'm discovering. I'd say to my spiritual friend, we both have this huge appreciation of beauty and of trying to stand quietly in a loud world, seeking something. I think we are seekers together so I don't knock anybody who says, "I'm spiritual but not religious." I just want to say, we have so much in common. I just don't think that being spiritual goes far enough. I don't think it will take you where you hunger to go. I think in the end, being spiritual in 21st-century America is a feeling that comes and goes. "I feel spiritual when I'm at the Grand Canyon at dawn. I don't when I watch my 3-year-old smear dirt all over herself." I feel it sometimes and it goes away sometimes. I don't think spirituality goes far enough because I think in the end it promotes a worldview where I get to create God in my image where I'm mostly just making it up.

Let me give you an example. I think some people would say as a tenet of their spirituality, “I believe that all people are good and if we could just get everybody on the same level, it would all work out.” I not only don’t believe that, I think you could pretty much say empirically that you can prove that human beings, for all of their belovedness, are not good inside their hearts. They are broken. Instead of getting into a fight about that, what I’d like to do is offer my friend an alternative from choosing between being spiritual or religious. I’d say, if you’ve got a minute, I’d like to tell you what I’ve come to understand and I’d read a little passage that would start out this way. Once there was a group of people.

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved [Acts 2:42-47].

I would say that that was not a religion. There was no religion around that explained that experience. It was spirituality that went beyond spirituality to the start of the church. There’s a difference between religion and the church. Now, here’s where it goes off the rails. If we were having a conversation about this, I’d never have the time to be able to say, let me tell you three reasons why I believe this. You’d never politely sit long enough. You’d interact with me. But let me just give you three hints about why I think that spirituality isn’t enough. I’d start with the idea that first, spirituality leads to transcendent moments, moments when I’m at the beach and I feel at one with the universe. But the church is about something different. It is about lives that are being transformed. Spiritually basically says I have to wake up and become one with the universe. The church says it’s not about knowledge or nirvana; it’s about grace. It’s about not just realizing and recognizing, but agreeing that as much as this world is beautiful, it’s broken. As much as the people around me are beautiful, they are broken. As much as the brokenness in the world exists, it starts with me. I am a broken person and grace is what the church is about. The church talks about brokenness being healed—broken people, body, relationships, soul being healed. It talks about lost people being found. It talks about people without meaning redeemed.

I think one of the challenges for people who are spiritual but not religious is that spirituality does not have much to say about sin that doesn’t sound like Pablum. “Oh, it’s just because they don’t know any better.” They *do* know better, but they do it anyway. I say that with some authority because I know better and I do it anyway. I am a sin-broken person. Spirituality doesn’t make sense of sin alone. I need more than enlightenment. I need rescue. So the first thing I’d say to my friend is, Christianity is never going to make sense to you. Spirituality will always be enough until you come to the place where you feel like “I need to be rescued. I’m tired of trying to be good enough.”

The second thing I’d say to my friend, *spiritual but not religious*, is I’d say, spirituality can show us the beauty of the universe, but only the church can show us Jesus. Those of us who follow the one God believe that God came to earth and when Jesus showed up, God stayed on earth so we wouldn’t have to wonder what spirituality would look like. We could see it, touch it, listen

to it, feel it, decide if we wanted to follow it or not. The difference between spirituality and religion may be the rules, but the difference between spirituality and Christianity is Jesus. The Word created the world and the Word became flesh. God put on flesh because God seems to love that earth stuff. He likes to get His hands dirty. He makes flesh terrific. He loves the idea of sex. He loves the idea of sleep. He particularly loves the idea of chocolate. It's all good.

If I went academic for second, I'd say spirituality comes from the word Spirit which comes from the Latin *Spiritus*, meaning breath. For the Greeks, the Spirit is known as *Pneuma*, which also means breath. The Hebrew word *Ruah* means two things closely linked to one another: wind and breath. Whenever people of Biblical times heard *wind* in the Scripture, they also understood *Spirit* and wherever they heard *Spirit* they also understood *wind*. The Spirit is about the breath that you can never see. Christianity is about what can be seen and touched and felt and followed. Early on the word for religion as applied to Christianity, *religio*, meant tying together the flesh. The early word for the church is the flesh gathered together. It's all about bodies.

The rallying cry of the church throughout the ages to all who say "I hunger to know God" is "Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again." This is the lens through which we see the world. It started on that road from Jerusalem to Emmaus when some guys who were walking along saw a dead person and didn't realize the person was dead. He started walking with them and He opened the Scriptures. Their hearts started to burn and then it says He broke bread with them and they recognized Him in the breaking of the bread. It's flesh. But the key word in that sentence, *they recognized Him in the breaking of the bread*, is the key word to the biggest clash between spirituality and Christianity. It's the word *they* because I've got to tell you, there are times I would much rather be spiritual than Christian.

The problem with being Christian is you have to put up with the church. That didn't come out right, but it came out true. The problem with being Christian is that you have to put up with the church. Spirituality is about me being a better me, but the church is about *us* together and that's the problem. Nobody said it better than this man. He became known around the world as a huge defender of spirituality and freedom and brought freedom to millions. He explored Christianity but decided to turn away from Christianity as he discovered it because of this one sentence. Mahatma Gandhi said, "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians." He said, "Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." That's the quandary. It seems like some of us want to have Jesus or at least the Jesus of our imaginations. There is a book out now, *They Like Jesus but Not the Church*. I understand that very well.

A lot of people want to have Jesus as they understand Him but without the church. It's easy to dismiss much of the church—TV preachers, marked by what we are against, being judgmental or old-fashioned or narrow-minded or sexist or racist or whatever -ist you put at the end of that sentence. You can look and find people in the church just like that, but can you have Jesus without the church? I'd say to my *spiritual but not religious* friends that the big question that Jesus came to have answered was, "Who do you say that I am?" He spends 7½ chapters of the Gospel of Mark, showing who He is and doing all kinds of miracles.

²⁷ Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?" ²⁸ They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." [Mark 8:27-28]

He turns to the disciples He has lived with for two years.

¹⁵ “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

What does Jesus think of that answer? He commends it big time.

¹⁷ Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.

To know who Jesus Christ is, to know He is the Son of the living God; this is not something you come up with on your own. God has to reveal it to you. Faith is a gift from God which He gives us and works into us through the Gospel of Jesus. Then Jesus adds to Peter’s answer, “Good job, Peter!” and ties Himself inseparably to the church by saying,

¹⁸ And I tell you that you are Peter,

Peter, a new name, a new person,

and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.
[Matthew 16:15-18]

I think you cannot have Jesus without the church, without all these other messy people who embarrass you all the time. Somehow Jesus Christ has said,

²⁰ For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.” [Matthew 18:20]

We are about to celebrate 60 years of gathering two or more together in His Name. To my skeptical spiritual friend, I could point to lots of examples of the good. How come people only pick on the bad in the churches? They could point to all the good things that happen. We could talk about the millions of dollars that are raised for the poor or the thousands who pack into this church, whether they attend here or not, to receive comfort and hope as we host for those who have lost others in grief. We could celebrate 22 years of over 30,000 students a year going all over the world in the Name of Jesus because of YouthWorks which started right here. There are so many YouthWorks summer staff that it takes two weekends to train them all and we have the privilege of hosting them here. Thousands of kids have learned about how to separate good from bad, marriages have been restored, alcoholics have experienced grace. But I probably wouldn’t talk about all that.

If a guy said to me, “I’m spiritual but not religious. What do I need the church for?” I’d tell them about something that’s not working. A few years ago now, one of my friends, I don’t know him real well, but one of my friends lost his job. It was one of those terrible times to lose a job and he was too old, too high-paid, too senior to find a job again. He has worked and worked and worked at it and gone into depression and worked and worked at it, but he has not been able to get a job again. Let’s call him Dennis. Dennis has struggled mightily with that. Dennis is part of a group here and one of the guys in the group is Bruce. Bruce committed himself to meeting with Dennis every single Thursday morning as long as Dennis would show up. They’ve been doing it for well over three years now. Sometimes Dennis is too depressed to show up and I see Bruce in the corner of the coffee shop, waiting for him to show up. They have long since run past the places where Bruce can say, “Here are three more guys. You can check with them.” All his guys

are gone. “Here are two more ideas. You can do this. Here are three more prayers. That will fix it.” Now all they are doing is coming and sitting together so that in the Name of Jesus, Bruce can offer Dennis hope and the faith to hang on and the love that will not let him go.

That’s why spirituality is never enough. That’s why we need the church, because church stops us from creating God in our own image. It keeps focusing on Jesus. That’s what God looks like. The church stops us from making spirituality about me because, as much as I hate it, it’s not about me or my feelings. Church puts us together to do the work of the Kingdom. It says, “This is why I have brought you together.” Jesus said very early on that His agenda was clear.

¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” [Luke 4:18-19]

That is the good news and that is our job. That’s why Jesus said to stay with the church. You know, I saw that phrase a little differently when He said, “and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” You know what that means? It means that the church goes to the very gates of Hell. It means some of you are going right to the edges of Hell yourselves right now. Jesus says that even if Hell is unloosed on earth, His church would not be abandoned.

I’m excited for the denominational move we made today, but again, there ain’t no perfect denomination. There ain’t no terrible denomination. We’ll screw up whatever we join. We are only called to be the church, to love God the King and to do His work and love each other. I think these are great questions. I think you and I need to struggle with all of these questions each week, let me say, at the end of each week. You are never going to win one of these arguments. You are never going to argue someone into the Kingdom of Heaven. The best you can hope for with this one is to share with them why spirituality was not enough for you, why you found that you needed the church of Jesus the Savior, and then if you do that winsomely enough and humbly enough and friendly enough, you might be able to say, “Why don’t you come and see?”

Remember the woman nobody else wanted to talk to whom Jesus befriended and she ran around saying, “Come and see the one who changed my life.” It’s not about flash. It’s not about glitz. It’s certainly not about denomination. It’s about what God does through people like you and you and you when we stay together in the Kingdom of Heaven.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.