

SERMON TITLE: "God Doesn't Quit"

TEXT: 1 Timothy 2:1-6

PREACHED AT: Neighbourhood Church

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Way back when I was in school, I remember the first week back in class after summer holidays and the "What I did on my summer holidays" assignment.

I don't recall ever being particularly anxious to do these assignments because, a) I wasn't terribly excited to be back in school; and b) because for a farm kid, "what I did over summer" often involved shoveling manure and chasing pigs around a sweltering hot barn; I didn't think was nearly as exciting as Disneyland and probably not worth sharing with the broader middle school world (of course I did have "real" holidays, too).

Well we're still in the middle of summer (no need to have an anxiety attack just yet!), but our family has just returned from our summer holidays and as I was preparing for this Sunday it kind of felt like that first week back in school (minus the childish resentment and bitterness about farm work ☺).

There was some shaking out of the vacation cobwebs as well as a bit of looking back at our time spent back with family and friends in Alberta as I reflected on this morning's passage.

Every preacher invariably brings her or his own experience to the task of trying to interpret the task. So when I sat down on Wednesday with 1 Timothy 2 and began working on this week's sermon, I found myself foraging around my experiences of the last few weeks to find a way into the text.

So, what did I do on my summer holidays? Well, I had a lot of interesting conversations.

At Celebration 2010 (not technically part of my holidays, but part of my time spent away), I had a chance to sit down with people from across the Canadian MB world; I listened to stories of how God is at work in places like Hepburn, SK, Langley, BC, Fresno, CA, Winnipeg, MB, and Coaldale, AB.

I got to meet people I already knew and got to know a lot of good people I had never met before; I met some good people for the first time.

Then it was off to stay with family in southern Alberta for our holidays where I had more conversations. I reconnected with a lot of people that I unfortunately see far too rarely.

Once upon a time, there was a group of us in southern Alberta. We were all a bunch of eager-beaver 20-somethings who were going to change the church. Now, we are in our

30's and 40's and we've experienced a bit more of life's ups and downs. We've probably realized that we know less—about faith, about church, about *kids*, and about lots of other things—than we once thought we did!

We have different levels of appreciation for the church these days. Some have maintained a strong commitment to the church, despite the ups and downs and continue to be very involved, whether in positions of pastoral leadership or lay involvement. Others have been burned by the church and have grown somewhat disillusioned. Others are somewhere in between.

One conversation with a good friend who would probably be in the “disillusioned” camp stands out. Here's what he said:

I'm not that interested in church anymore. I go because it's good for my kids, but I could really take it or leave it. Too much squabbling about trivial stuff that has nothing to do with following Jesus, too much politics, too little flexibility or willingness to consider new ideas.

This is not, by any means, someone who no longer believes in God or who has turned their back on God or anything like that. This is someone who continues to be deeply convinced that Jesus is the answer to the biggest questions we have.

But this is a person who has questions. This is someone who, as a leader, experienced some of the ugliness that churches are capable of. This is a person who wonders whether we are doing church as we should.

This is a person who is happy to say “yes” to Jesus. But the church? They're not so sure.

Sound familiar? I'm sure many of know of with stories like these, whether it's from our friends, family members, co-workers.... They are tragically uncommon.

There are many people these days who are attracted by Jesus, but repelled by the church.

This week's news provided another high-profile example. Famous American novelist Anne Rice (the bestselling novelist most popularly known for "Interview with the Vampire" and her other creepy vampire novels—which have sold over 100 million copies) was raised Roman Catholic, left the church, and returned in 1998. Here's what she said in about her return to Christianity in 1998:

I realized that the greatest thing I could do to show my complete love for Him was to consecrate my work to Him—to use any talent I had acquired as a writer, as a storyteller, as a novelist—for Him and for Him alone.

Sounds fantastic. Well, this week, twelve years later, Rice caused quite a buzz in declaring that she has “quit Christianity.” She made the following announcement, via her Facebook page:

“For those who care, and I understand if you don’t: Today I quit being a Christian. I’m out. I remain committed to Christ as always but not to being “Christian” or to being part of Christianity. It’s simply impossible for me to “belong” to this quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious, and deservedly infamous group. For ten years, I’ve tried. I’ve failed. I’m an outsider. My conscience will allow nothing else.”

My faith in Christ is central to my life. My conversion from a pessimistic atheist lost in a world I didn’t understand, to an optimistic believer in a universe created and sustained by a loving God is crucial to me. But following Christ does not mean following His followers. Christ is infinitely more important than Christianity and always will be, no matter what Christianity is, has been, or might become....

I quit being a Christian. I’m out. In the name of Christ, I refuse to be anti-gay. I refuse to be anti-feminist. I refuse to be anti-artificial birth control. I refuse to be anti-Democrat. I refuse to be anti-secular humanism. I refuse to be anti-science. I refuse to be anti-life. In the name of Christ, I quit Christianity and being Christian. Amen.”

There are many things that could be said (and *are* being said—the blogging world was abuzz this week!) about Anne Rice’s comments here. We could talk about her understanding of the role of the church as Christ’s body, about how it is impossible to follow Jesus in isolation, about how being a Christian does not require you to identify with the whole list of “anti’s” that Rice mentioned. We could even talk about the weirdness of announcing something this significant on Facebook!

But I had the vacation conversation with my friend in my head as I read Rice’s story.

What is it, about the church that turns people off?

Of course it is always a *particular* church that turns *particular* people with particular experiences and understandings of God and faith off.

And it is not always the church’s fault when people quit on it. This is important to say. We live in a context where people often want God on their own terms, without all of that messy “other people stuff.”

So it’s not fair to talk about “the church” as having a problem because my friend or Anne Rice or the people you happen to know who are no longer very interested in it.

But their questions and concerns should make us stop and think. We all know that the church isn't perfect. The church needs to listen to voices from both inside and outside.

Sometimes God has things to say to us through sources we might not expect. Sometimes critics of the church are a blessing because they help us hear God's voice to us in new ways.

I think our text this morning has something to teach us about how we are to live and worship as a church in an age of "church-quitting."

READ 1 TIMOTHY 2:1-6

So what might this passage have to do with Anne Rice or my friend in Alberta or modern twenty-first century folks who are ticked off or apathetic toward the church?

Well, as always, we need to begin with the original context.

One of the most basic principles of biblical interpretation is that you have to first understand what the text would have meant to its initial hearers/readers in *their* context and only then move on to what it might mean for us today.

It is important to remember that 1 Timothy is a letter that was written to address very specific problems in the church at a particular time in history and in a particular place.

Paul was not writing this letter to a bunch of skeptical post-Christian residents of the global village. 1 Timothy was written for the very specific purpose of addressing church discipline issues. It seems that there were false teachers from within a bunch of house churches in Ephesus who were leading people astray.

I don't have time to address the issue of what these teachers were teaching (mainly because the scholars don't seem to agree on what was going on), but there were people from inside the church causing division based on quarrels about doctrine and matters of order in worship.

Chapter one makes this clear: it talks about "certain persons teaching false doctrine" and "people who have departed from the goal—love which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and pure faith, and toward "meaningless talk." Timothy is basically being conscripted by Paul to put a lid on the false teaching that is distracting people from the point of faith and confusing their worship.

How? Well, interestingly 1 Timothy 2 starts by talking about how we should pray and who we should pray for. And the whole section seems to be dealing with instructions on worship!

So, at least on the surface, it doesn't seem like our passage today in its initial context has much to do with the whole "quitting church" theme that I've just been talking about.

But I think that beneath the surface there is a connection.

In both contexts—first century Ephesus and twenty-first century North America—there are conflicts about what church is supposed to look like, about how we're supposed to do it.

Whether it is first century troublemakers preaching false doctrine from within the church or twenty-first century skeptics quitting church because of its many shortcomings (according to them), there is an age-old question lurking:

Is being a Christian primarily about *belief* or *behaviour*.

Is it about *believing* the right things—about ourselves, about God, about history? Is it about, as Anne Rice seems to think, being anti-this or anti-that (being *against* the right things). Or is it about *doing* the right things

The question is especially relevant for us here in the twenty-first century. Due to things like the explosion of knowledge via the internet, the shrinking of borders, immigration, etc, we are increasingly aware that there are many people in our communities, our province, our nation who do not believe what we believe.

Probably to an extent unlike any other in history, we hold our Christian convictions in the marketplace of ideas that is populated by innumerable other options. This can have a *disorienting* effect on the *content* of our faith.

So when the *content* is one of many other options, it becomes easier to focus on the *practice*. If we can't agree about what to *believe*, perhaps we can at least agree about what to do. Perhaps there will be less conflict if we just decide to ignore beliefs and focus on behaviour.

At the very least, this can be a helpful approach to finding a starting point for conversation with people who don't agree with us about, say, the nature of Christ, the meaning of the cross, etc.

I've used this approach myself. Very often, when talking to someone who disagrees with me about what beliefs are true about reality, I will talk instead about behaviour.

Sometimes I use a marriage analogy I once heard: if a couple is having a hard time feeling loving or believing that they love each other, counselors often tell them to act as

if they loved each other for a week and see what happens. In a sense, the couple is being told to *behave* their way into *feeling*.

In the same way, if we are finding it hard to believe in God, sometimes we need to act as if we did. We go to church, we pray, we give, we show compassion to the needy, we love our neighbour even when it's inconvenient or painful and, sometime along the way, we find our belief strengthened. Just like in the marriage example, we behave our way into belief.

Perhaps in affirming the good that is done by those around us, regardless of the belief that is motivating it, people will gradually be convinced of the lordship and purposes of the God who made them to want to long for and respond to goodness.

But even if this is a good practical strategy to adopt from time to time, the bigger question remains. *What is the connection?* Is belief or behaviour the main thing?

The answer—and I think Paul and Timothy would agree—is: both.

Belief is the main thing.

Behaviour is the main thing.

They are not meant to be separated.

God intends our belief to lead to loving behaviour—behaviour characterized by the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5 (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control).

But the reverse is also true, as we saw in the marriage example. Behaviour can lead to belief.

I think we see this at work in our passage this morning:

In 1 Tim. 2:1-4 we see the behaviour part.

Paul tells Timothy to tell the church to *do something*. They are supposed to pray for everyone—even those they might not think obvious like those in government and authority (as we did this morning). Why? Because:

1. It may have the result of allowing the church to live peaceful and quiet lives and allow them to pursue godliness and holiness
2. More importantly, because it pleases God *who wants all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth*

The behaviour of the church, through prayer for **all people**, even those who do not think like us or agree with us or behave like us, through peaceful and quiet lives of godliness and holiness, can play a part in God's desire that everyone be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.

When the church's focus is where it is supposed to be—on what Paul calls the "goal" of love a chapter earlier—God's intentions for the whole world are moved forward.

Our behaviour can lead to belief—for ourselves, and for a watching world. The world can see our good works and glorify our Father who is in heaven, as Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount (Mat. 5:12).

Wouldn't it be great if people looked at the church and instead of thinking negative things like Anne Rice thinks or my friend thinks or the people you rub shoulders think, thought, "I admire those people. I love how they love each other. I admire how they live. They have pure hearts, good consciences, and sincere faith. They seem to get what life is for, what it means to be human. I want to know more about why they are the way they are."

When the church is focusing on the goal, this is what I think can happen.

But behaviour isn't everything.

In 1 Tim. 2:5-6 we see the belief part.

Paul is very clear about what he believes and what he wants Timothy to remind the church in Ephesus:

For there is one God and one mediator between God and human beings, Christ Jesus, himself human, ⁶ who gave himself as a ransom for all people.

Belief is important to Paul. Paul is clear—in 1 Timothy and in all of his other letters—that we cannot attain salvation through our own actions. Nobody can behave their way into the kingdom of God. Believing that God is truthful and that he has accomplished all that is necessary for our salvation is crucial.

Paul is big on belief. 2 Timothy 1:9 speaks of the God "who has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace."

But Paul knows that belief separated from behaviour doesn't convince a watching world of the truth of the gospel. It doesn't give the "I like Jesus but not the church" folks a good reason to rethink their positions.

And actually, aside from the question of how we appear to the world around us, belief without behaviour isn't even *possible*.

The book of James makes this clearer than anywhere else in Scripture when it talks about how faith without works is no faith at all.

But Paul talks about this theme as well. In Romans 6, for example, he talks about how as those touched by grace, we have been set free from the bondage of sin and are now free to become slaves of righteousness.

In his letter to the Colossians he talks about how as followers of Jesus we have taken off the old self and put on the new self "which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its creator."

Once again, we see a strong connection between behaviour and belief. They cannot be separated.

Now, perhaps you're thinking something along these lines: *Well that sounds a little simplistic! He seems to be saying that if we all just loved each other then nobody would get angry and leave the church anymore. That if we were all just nicer people there would be no more church-quitters.*

Well, I'm not actually saying that. I'm not naïve. There will always be people who like Jesus but not the church—sometimes for reasons that are at least understandable, sometimes for reasons that are selfish and silly.

I think Anne Rice is right about some things and wrong about some others. I think that my friend in AB is right about some things and wrong about others.

It is important to do ask questions and push back when people quit the church based on a caricature that isn't appropriate.

But, whatever is going on in the hearts and minds of those who are quitting church, I think Paul's words to Timothy offer us a reminder that how we live as the church matters in an age where people aren't interested in church.

We are to love and honour and pray for the people that God loves. Which is everyone. The scope of God's love is universal.

God wants *all people* to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth, and how we live and love and pray and behave and hope together as a church is part of how this will happen.

We cannot stop everyone from quitting on the church. There are as many reasons for people walking away from the church as there are people.

But we can consistently, in how we speak and how we act, point to the God who doesn't quit on his people. The God who is pleased, who is happy, who smiles down upon us when we keep the main thing—belief and behaviour as part of a whole life offered to Christ—the main thing.

Amen.

