

Marks of the church: A voluntary community

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Ok, I'm going to start today's teaching with a Bible quiz. I don't want you to open your Bible, but just to answer my question — Ready?

In John's gospel, what is the last command that Jesus gives to his followers?

Anyone?

We'll come back to this.

We have started a series on the marks of the church — that is, what things mark us as a church and not just some social club. Oddly, though, our second mark of the church is something that we share with social clubs. It is this: that we are a *voluntary community*. That is, this community exists because we choose to join it.

Of course, in America, in 2013, we live in the land of infinite choices. Do you want Crest Cavity Protection Toothpaste – Regular, or Cool Mint? Perhaps Crest Complete Multi-Benefit Whitening with Tartar Protection-Clean Mint? Or Crest Complete Multi-Benefit Tartar Control Whitening + Scope Liquid Gel Toothpaste- Minty Fresh? Crest Hello Kitty Toothpaste? Crest Fairies Toothpaste? Crest Spider-Man Liquid Gel Toothpaste? Which of the 42 types of Crest toothpaste will you choose? Or perhaps something from AquaFresh, Arm & Hammer, Colgate, or Tom's of Maine? (By the way, I don't recommend using the tube of Doramad Radioactive Toothpaste you might find in your German great-grandma's medicine cabinet).

Or which Anabaptist church will you go to? Mennonite Church USA? Mennonite Brethren? Old Order Mennonite? Church of God in Christ, Mennonite? Amish Mennonite? Conservative Mennonite Conference? Biblical Mennonite Alliance? Alliance of Mennonite Evangelical Congregations? Brethren? Amish? Brethren in Christ? Hutterite?

Yes, we live in a land of infinite choice, whether it's toothpaste, or entertainment, or jobs, or education, or spouses, or sexual preferences, or even when it comes to plain or simple churches.

So, it is nothing special that we are a voluntary community. Back in the 1500's, this was a big deal. You were born a Christian, and this meant you were born a Roman Catholic, and were a member of the local parish. The notion of citizenship and church membership were so intertwined, that the idea that one should *choose* one's religious beliefs was so incredibly radical, that many, many of our Anabaptist fore-mothers and fore-fathers were killed for doing so. Now we have so many choices, we are spiritually drowning in them.

And I don't think I have a solution for this. We cannot choose not to choose. But when we are overwhelmed, unable to find just the right church or the right choice, we disciples of Jesus know what to do – return to Jesus and his teaching and see what he says.

Which is why I asked the Bible quiz question. The last commandment of Jesus has to have some import, right? Let's look at John 21:15-22:

¹⁵ When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶ A second time he said to him, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." ¹⁷ He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. ¹⁸ Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go." ¹⁹ (This he said to show by what death he was to glorify God.) And after this he said to him, "Follow me."

²⁰ Peter turned and saw following them the disciple whom Jesus loved, who had lain close to his breast at the supper and had said, "Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?" ²¹ When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, "Lord, what about this man?" ²² Jesus said to him, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!"

What's the last command? *Follow me.*

Jesus is reminding Peter that Peter loves Jesus, and that he had a job to do, which was to pastor Jesus's disciples when Jesus was gone. He then tells Peter how Peter is going to die; telling him this, I think, so Peter won't be surprised and be tempted to despair again. Peter, says, Jesus – you are going to be martyred for following me, but I want you to follow me anyway.

And, of course, Peter (being Peter) isn't content with this. He wants to know what is going to happen to the other disciple, probably John. In other words, Peter gets distracted, just as we can become distracted by the choices we have. But Jesus calls him back to his senses — don't worry about him Peter; his story is not your concern right now. Your job is to feed my sheep, live your life towards an unwanted death, all the time following me.

Peter's choices is narrowed down to two — either to follow Jesus, or not to follow Jesus. He has a real choice, and, though his way was sometimes a bit crooked (just like ours), he choose to follow Jesus.

This is what André Gingerich Stoner says about the church as a voluntary community:

People who have heard Jesus's call to "follow me", who have experienced God's love and grace, who choose to open their lives to the Spirit, and allow themselves to be molded into the likeness of Christ. You aren't a member of this community because your parents or the king or the culture around you made you a member. A public confession of faith, usually linked to adult believer's baptism is the way people enter this community.

We are given a choice in big ways, like Peter, to follow Christ or not. We are given a choice every day — will we follow in Christ's way *today, here?* Our community exists to help you say "Yes" to this choice.

What are some other places that Jesus calls people to follow him?

- Matthew is called to leave his tax collector's table and follow Jesus (Matthew 9:9)
- Peter and Andrew were fishing, and Jesus calls them to follow him and start fishing for people (Matthew 4:19)
- People who wanted to follow him, but not just yet, were told to leave their family and comfort to follow him (Matthew 8)
- We are told to take up our cross and follow him (Matthew 10:38, Matthew 16:24)
- We are told to sell our possessions and follow him (Matthew 19:21; Mark 10:21)
- We are his sheep who should follow his voice (John 10)
- If we serve Jesus, we must follow him (John 12:26)
- Peter is called to follow Jesus just before Jesus leaves (John 21:22)