



### Ghouls, Ghosts ...and Gospel!

**T** rue story: I recently attended a friend’s 50th-birthday party—a backyard barbecue for family, friends and neighbors. The forecast said rain, so our host rigged up an enormous tarp that spanned half the yard. When the torrents burst forth, we huddled happily beneath our cozy shelter.

My wife, Eden, and I sat next to a couple and the wife’s mother. It was obvious to my religious radar that these were not “Christians,” though such assumptions fail repeatedly. Anyway, I’m better at asking questions than carrying conversations, so we got them talking about their greatest passion: Halloween.

More specifically, this threesome (a blue-collar foreman, his wife and mother-in-law) run a popular, elaborate “Haunted House” every October 31. They recruit volunteers from the neighborhood (as ghouls and goblins) and charge an entry fee or take donations. The funds are donated to a children’s hospice—a place for sick kids (usually terminal) and their families to stay during treatment. It’s really a beautiful labor of love.

When I affirmed their dedication and compassion, the backstory came out. The husband said, “I’m a Christian, but I left the church long ago. Both my mom and dad were ordained ministers in the Salvation Army. She felt the call to ministry when she was fifteen after God healed her of blindness (after ten years!). The first sight she saw was a drunk, stumbling in the street outside their home. She (and dad later) dedicated their lives to love the down-and-outers in the inner city. When I was six, I was helping them lead services in the streets. I picked up my compassion from them. And I still always have time for the homeless.

“But,” he continued, “I was also exposed to the worst sides of Christianity—scary stuff. Over time, I noticed how people in these churches were more unhappy and less compassionate than those outside. So I finally left.”

Then the mother-in-law shared. “I used to attend a Bible study. We were reading about battles in the Bible. I spoke up and said, ‘Hey, I think war is war. And war is

always awful. And who are we to say this group is better or more righteous than that group?’ So the Bible study leader pointed to the door and said, ‘There’s the door. Use it.’ She kicked me out there and then ...and I’ve never gone back.”

I was flabbergasted. When faithful questioning becomes spiritually illegal, that’s the first sign that you’re in a toxic context and it’s high time to make a quick exit.

Here were two classic *done*s—done with the shenanigans of religious mini-kingdoms that look nothing like Christ. Then the wife spoke up. “I just see myself as spiritual. I believe in God but I think it’s about loving others.” She was a *none* (not affiliated with any religious corporation or institution).

I paraphrased a favorite passage, “John, the apostle of love, wrote, ‘Anyone who loves knows God, because God IS love.’ And he also says, “The one who says they know God—but doesn’t love—is a liar.”

So here were three lovely, compassionate, caring people who don’t feel safe in a Christian fellowship. It’s a quandary...and I said so:

“Well, the last thing you need is someone trying to herd you back into a religious pen. But honestly, I do worry about the *non*es and *done*s in isolation. I worry about their lack of...”

“...community,” suggested the wife, nodding.

“Yes,” I said, “They often have no infrastructure to do Love’s work in the world. Yet here you are! You left the institutional church but you’ve taken God’s love with you... and now community is emerging around you. Ironically, the hospitality, compassion and community are happening around the event [Halloween] many Christians are afraid of!”

“What cinched it for me,” said the husband, was when my daughter (six at the time) was invited to speak to the whole school assembly, telling them why it’s important to love others and help sick children. The principal sent her home with a donation and a note that said, ‘Whatever you’re doing to parent this child, keep doing it.’ And so the same compassion I got from Mom has now been passed on to her.”

That’s how I saw the gospel peaking out from between ghouls and ghosts. It was beautiful! □

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