

Viewpoint: JAV365

THE MOST IMPORTANT INSTITUTION IN THE WORLD AND THE FOLLY OF BUMPER-STICKER THEOLOGY

by Ted Kluck

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August brought with it the release of my book about NFL quarterback Robert Griffin III called, creatively, *Robert Griffin III* (Thomas Nelson). I was interested to see Griffin's new Twitter tagline, which read, "I have no religion. I have a relationship with God."¹ There's nothing original about this, and variations of it can be seen on car bumpers and the Twitter feeds of college sophomores.

In a way, I don't blame Griffin. He's just parroting a version of a culturally palatable line that he's heard somewhere before, only he has the added pressure of having to sell Adidas shoes, Subway sandwiches, and Washington Redskins season-ticket packages in the most political city in the free world—a city where the word "evangelical" carries heavy connotations.

What Griffin's Twitter tagline is saying is that he *does* have a relationship with God, though we're left to wonder what that relationship consists of. Does it consist of heartfelt gratitude for a God who loved him enough to send His Son to pay on the cross the penalty for Griffin's sins? Does it acknowledge that Griffin desperately needs a redeemer? I hope so, for Griffin's sake.

What it's also saying—the "I have no religion" part—is, "I'm publicly distancing myself from everything that's weird, distasteful, dogmatic, potentially alienating, or patently uncool about Christians, organized religion, and the church." Let's acknowledge that there are many of these things. I don't blame Griffin for his statement, but I really wish he'd change it.

What's Weird: Fame, Money, and the Christian Celebrity Food Chain. You're reading this today because Robert Griffin III is good at throwing touchdown passes, and because I wrote two books with Kevin DeYoung. Because Griffin had a sensational rookie season, somebody asked me to write a book about him because I'm one of the few Christians who also write about sports. Somebody asked me to write *this* piece because they saw another piece on *ChristianityToday.com* that I had written about Griffin. That's how the food chain works. This Christian celebrity food chain is rife with conflict and jealousy and that sometimes can make it hard to be a Christian.

What's weird about it is that at any given time, any number of people within the church are using² each other to make money, get book deals, get articles published, get clients, get Twitter or blog followers, or simply to feel a little more important. Everybody now has a blog, a Facebook page, and a Twitter feed that they're probably trying to leverage into the elusive "something more," and in the church at least, it's being confusingly leveraged under the auspices of "ministry." Sometimes it actually is ministry,³ but sometimes it's just a guy trying to feel famous.

In our quest for significance, we conveniently forget that "the human heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick" (Jer. 17:9). If others think a lot of us, we tend to think a lot of ourselves. This is especially true of celebrities, where this dynamic is probably exhausting and disillusioning. Though the church once was a peaceful, easy place to fellowship and hear a sermon, it easily can turn into a place where everybody wants to use you for something. I sympathize with him while, at some level, I am probably contributing to Griffin's disillusionment. This can make bumper-sticker Christianity (i.e., churchless Christianity) extremely seductive.

I can only pray that God uses Griffin's celebrity, including my book about him, to bring Griffin, myself, and his fans into a deeper and more meaningful relationship with Him.

What's Hard: Relationships. I'm an introvert, so it's disconcertingly easy to fool myself into thinking that I can live without relationships for long periods of time. It's a good day (in my economy, at least) when nobody calls me on the phone, and nobody needs anything. By contrast, the church is nothing if not an incubator for a variety of challenging and time-and-resource-consuming relationships. If you're involved in serving, discipling, and loving people, those people usually need something.

In His providence, God humbled me by making *me* the person who has needed something over the past eighteen months. There have been, thankfully, people on the other end of the phone to help me—and they've been pastors, elders, and friends from church: religious people.

If I'd been a churchless, bumper-sticker Christian, I would have missed this entirely. I might have fallen prey to the lonely jealousy, bitterness, and other sins that the church helped me move past.

What Christ Loved: The Church, Tough Preaching, and Structure. Ephesians 5:25–27 reads, "Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish."

Because Christ loved the church, I'm compelled to do the same. What's more, we just don't see a structureless church presented in Scripture. As Kevin DeYoung wrote, "Churchless Christianity makes about as much sense as a Christless church, and has just as much biblical warrant....the Bible does not teach a leaderless church. Instead we

see the apostles exercising great authority over the churches (2 Cor. 13:1–4). We have pastors commanded to ‘exhort and rebuke with all authority’ (Titus 2:15; 2 Tim. 4:2).”⁴

J. C. Ryle writes, “I ask you what you think of the faithful minister of Christ, who honestly exposes sin and pricks your conscience. Mind how you answer that question. Too many, nowadays, like only those ministers who prophesy smooth things and let their sins alone, who flatter their pride and amuse their intellectual taste, but who never sound an alarm, and never tell them of a wrath to come.”⁵

We live in a culture that celebrates smooth things and smooth people. We like having our intellectual tastes amused, as evidenced by the avalanche of new Christian books hitting the shelves each year. But what we desperately need are pastors and churches sounding the alarm.

What’s Redemptive: Repentance and Amazing Grace. The church isn’t perfect. After I co-wrote *Why We Love the Church*, I embarked on a few of the most challenging and church-hating years of my life. The reasons were myriad, but can be condensed to two: I was jealous of my pastor’s success, and we couldn’t get pregnant but were in a church that we not-so-affectionately labeled “the fertile crescent.” At that moment I wished I “had no religion” and wished I could “love Jesus but not the church.” I wanted very badly to be a bumper-sticker Christian. I was once good at writing about the church but had become bad at going to church or *being* the church. I was a fake. Bitterness, hopelessness, and cynicism over these two issues led to a lot of destructive sin. But one morning in church, I heard a sermon (from Kevin) that seemed to call me out personally and challenge those sins. The following week I was wracked with a Holy Spirit-prompted guilt, which ultimately led to repentance. At that time, there were godly pastors, elders, and friends who were there to hear my confession, pray with me, show me Scripture, encourage me with resources, and lift up a sinner.

For me, loving the church became practical instead of conceptual. Instead of an obligation, it was a lifeline. It was hope for a dying man. What I needed was Christ, and I met Him through the church and its imperfect members, of which I am one. As John Piper once preached, “The gates of Hades, the powers of death, will prevail against every institution but one, the church.”⁶ Piper also said, of pastoral ministry, “This is the greatest work in the world...because it’s desperate work.”⁷ Christianity, and the church, is desperate work. There is unbelievable brokenness there, but also amazing grace.

The church is the best place to meet God authentically, and ironically we meet Him through imperfect people who are created in His image and who are called to meet together. I’ve seen Him work. He’s shown me my sin and led me to the cross—the only place where I have any comfort or hope in this life or the next. I’ve seen *amazing* grace in the church. It helped save a wretch like me. —*Ted Kluck*

Ted Kluck is the author and co-author of several award-winning books, including *Why We Love the Church* (Moody, 2009) and *Finding God in the Dark: Faith, Disappointment, and the Struggle to Believe* (Bethany House, 2013).

NOTES

- 1 twitter.com/RGIII.
- 2 Meant, for now, in the least nefarious sense of the term “using.” But sometimes it’s more nefarious than that.
- 3 See John Piper’s *Desiring God* blog, for example, which has ministered to me at many times and in many different ways.
- 4 Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, *Why We Love the Church: In Praise of Institutions and Organized Religion* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), 164.
- 5 J. C. Ryle, *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties and Roots* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2010).
- 6 John Piper, “The Cosmic Church,” March 22, 1981. Sermon. www.desiringgod.org.
- 7 John Piper, “Be Strengthened by Grace,” September 21, 1997. Sermon. www.desiringgod.org.