



# Are we a church, or a burial society?

BY PABLO A. JIMÉNEZ

In the summer of 1999, when I was living in Austin, Texas, a Disciples congregation invited me to preach. The church, located in the Texan hill country, was old, small, and did not have a minister. As I arrived at the church building, an older lady began to clap, announcing, “There’s a baby in the church!” She was referring to Paola, my oldest daughter, who was a year and a half old at the time.

Noticing my puzzled expression, the woman explained, “The last time we had a baby in the church was two years ago, when Sister Smith’s granddaughter visited with her baby.”

Immediately, a question formed in my mind: *Were the Romans right?*

In order to understand my question, you need to know that I am a nerd, a bookworm, a compulsive reader. I’m the guy who reads German philosophy or French sociology on the airplane, while others read novels or watch in-flight movies. My mind is wired just a bit differently than most. In any case, there was a reason for me to ask such a weird question.

The Roman government initially did not understand what the Christian church was. At the beginning, the authorities didn’t even notice the church, which began as a Jewish sect. Later, however, Christianity became a multicultural movement, which belied its connection to normative Judaism. By the end of the first century, the government in Rome had concluded that the church was a superstition, not a new religion. Christian communities lacked the traits common

to religious movements at the time. They had no temples, no images of their gods, no sacrifices, no priests or priestesses, and so on. Eventually, this view of Christianity as superstition became the dominant view, legitimizing the persecution of the church.

However, for a brief moment in time, the Romans considered a third option. They thought of the church as a burial society.

Rome was a large, cosmopolitan city. People came to the city from all corners of the world. Most left their extended families behind, which created a distinct problem for them: *Who will bury me when I die?*

To address this problem, people organized burial societies. These were like co-ops that required paying membership fees in order to ensure a proper burial. Given that it is almost impossible to really care well for strangers, burial societies regularly organized banquets and other events that promoted social interaction, so that members got to know and care for one another.

For their part, the early Christians also buried church members and held regular “agape” feasts. To this day, churches fulfill a role akin to burial societies, organizing funerals for members and their relatives. It is easy to understand, then, why the Romans wondered if the Christian communities simply formed another web of burial societies.

Of course, the differences between a burial society and the church are stark. Burial societies were mostly secular groups, united only by the civil religion.

They did not bury children, who were buried by their parents in the event of an untimely death. They did not evangelize, although they did recruit new members in order to pay the bills and keep the organization going. They were closed societies that reserved the right to reject prospective members who did not belong to the same class or ethnicity of core members.

On the other hand, church members are united by faith in God through Jesus Christ, not only by their need for social interaction. Churches evangelize, calling people to faith. Our motivation to evangelize is love, not just getting more money to pay the bills. Churches welcome children and youth into their midst, providing faith-formation programs for them. A childless congregation does not fulfill its evangelizing mission, condemning itself to die in a generation or two. Christian congregations cannot reject people on the basis of class or ethnicity, given that the church has been multicultural from the day of its inception at Pentecost.

In short, burial societies eventually disappeared, and we, the church, are still thriving.

Are we? Or were the Romans right? ❧

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