

Brides of Christ

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [March 30, 2016](#) issue



Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Dante's Vision of Rachel and Leah*, watercolor, 1855.

If the church is the bride of Christ, then Jesus is married to both Rachel and Leah—to the church he wants and to the church he has to take. Rachel is the wife he loves and thought he was getting, but he can't have her without taking Leah, whom he doesn't love and didn't think he was marrying.

This metaphor from Jacob's two wives in the Old Testament has obvious limitations for the contemporary context. But it can't be dismissed just because we're offended by the notion of two wives. Metaphorically speaking, every married person has two spouses. There's the person you thought you were marrying and the stranger who came with that person. It's a great description of how Jesus receives the church.

Paul was pretty clear about what Jesus expects of his bride. He's looking for a church that will keep doing "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable" (Phil. 4:8). There are times when this is exactly what the church does. Every time the church throws itself into binding the wounds of the poor, taking risky steps toward justice, and proclaiming the grace of God, Jesus smiles like an old lover who remembers being

smitten by the spouse of his dreams.

There are also times when the church disappoints Jesus—when we flirt with those in power and wealth, or turn in on ourselves with hurt and accusations. There’s no need to list the familiar and manifold sins of the church. Every time I sit next to someone on an airplane who, after discovering my vocation, wants to tell me about the problems of the church, I always respond by saying, “Trust me, you don’t know the half of it.”

After he spent three years with his disciples, I think Jesus was clear about the vulnerabilities of his plans for the salvation of the world through the church. Being disappointed is hardly news to Jesus. Spouses are always disappointed at some point in each other. This is just another reason why serious relationships live out of commitments and vows.

But there are other times when the church doesn’t disappoint Jesus by its sins as much as it confuses him by its preoccupations. As the story goes, there wasn’t anything wrong with Leah. She just wasn’t the wife Jacob expected.

The Leah church today is the one preoccupied with its crumbling denominational structures—bishops, general assemblies, synods, dioceses, presbyteries, councils, and sessions. The passion of these bureaucracies is not to be head over heels in love, but to fret over how to pay the bills.

Rather than rushing into the arms of a sacred lover when it’s afraid, the church has meetings where it makes amendments to motions in response to overtures. None of this is inherently wrong, I guess. It’s just not what Jesus had in mind. And whenever a heartbreaking social injustice erupts in society, the mainline church is quick to set up a new task force, committee, or commission, or maybe hire a consultant to research the problem, survey opinions about it, and write a position paper that will be received into the minutes. Our ability to procreate the gifts of bureaucracy is stunning.

Like someone who unwraps a horribly knitted sweater on Christmas morning, Jesus responds by saying to the church, “Oh, wow, I can’t imagine how much time you put into this.”

It is striking that by the end of the Jacob narratives Jacob appears to have embraced Leah. When Rachel died the family was in transit, so Jacob bought a piece of

property by the side of road, buried her there, and kept moving. But when Leah died he had her buried in the family plot where he would eventually have his own bones placed. Maybe this means that he had come to embrace the spouse he was given more than the one he wanted and had to leave behind.

Jesus doesn't just love the church of his dreams; he also loves the church he gets, which is not so dreamy. His vow to the church, sealed on the cross, proclaimed that God was dying to love us as we are.

If it means nothing else, this means that we need to love the church we have, not the church we wish we had. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned in his little book *Life Together*, nothing is more dangerous to authentic community than our dreams for it. We will always prefer our ideal to the reality God has given us.

The challenge of the mainline church today is to give up its envy of the market-driven success of the sleek new churches and look for the mystery and miracle in old Leah. Only when we believe that our bureaucracy-laden, disappointing church life is still a delight to Jesus Christ will we be attractive to a culture looking for a savior.

People will always be drawn to any church that has received enough sacred love to offer it to others.