Good church, bad church

When our evangelism focuses on apologies instead of God’s grace, we're burying the lede.

by Elizabeth Palmer

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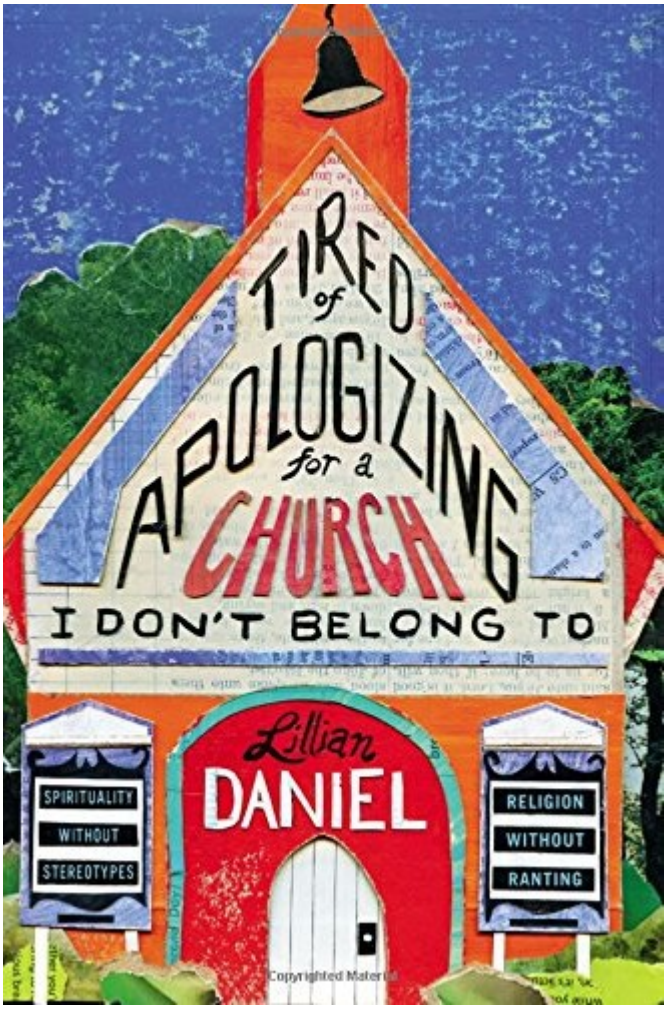
In Review



Tired of Apologizing for a Church I Don't Belong To

Spirituality without Stereotypes, Religion without Ranting

by Lillian Daniel
FaithWords

Lillian Daniel compellingly argues that that the church would be better off if we were to proclaim and enact the good news of God's generosity rather than apologize for the errors Christians continually make. When we approach evangelism from an apologetic stance (as in: "I'm sorry those three churches you experienced seventeen years ago didn't meet your needs. And before you even raise it, let me apologize for the Crusades, the Inquisition, suicide cults, and any other stereotype that kept you from looking further") we diminish the value both of our conversation partner and of our community of faith. "In my apologizing days," she explains, "people often came around to liking the version of church I was describing. But looking back, I can see it was a conversation of critical distance in which both parties kept God at arm's length. I was apologizing for a sport while selling them on a team." She was so busy extolling her own open-minded view of God that she didn't have time to talk about how she experiences God. She was burying the lede.

The lede isn't crankiness, ranting, apologies, or stereotypes. It's grace, experienced in community and filtered through humility and humor. Daniel, who excels in theological storytelling, captures that grace best when she exposes her own vulnerabilities.

Describing a conversation with a pew-mate who had caught her looking bored during an evangelical worship service for gay Christians, Daniel confesses: "it was like she had read my evil and limited mind." Daniel hadn't been judging the worshipers simply because their worship style didn't match hers. She knew they were searching for a place to feel at home, a church that would welcome them without trying to change their sexual orientation. So she wondered: "Why didn't they just dump all this oppressive stuff and come to my church instead? We'll do your gay wedding and spare you these blood songs with rainbow slides. It was a win-win. What did they have to lose?" But then her pew-mate pointed out that praise songs and PowerPoint presentations constitute meaningful worship for many people. "Her words reminded me that . . . it was arrogant and simpleminded of me to assume they all wanted just to jump on board my little ship."

In addition to being a pastor and writer, Daniel is a public speaker who is best known for her analysis and critique of the "spiritual but not religious" types. This book's breakdown of "Nones" into four categories—No Ways, No Longers, Never Haves, and Not Yets—is useful for Christians who want to talk about their experience of God's grace with people beyond the church walls. Daniel identifies unique characteristics of people in each of these categories, but her honesty about the human condition aims to bridge the divide between insiders and outsiders. While reflecting on Teresa of Avila, she ponders: "Who among us has never been a None?"

Yet, there's an unspoken—and, for me, somewhat maddening—tension in this book between Daniel's impulses toward inclusivity and her desire to define her faith apart from the church she doesn't "belong to." Despite the book's subtitle, Daniel occasionally slips into stereotypes and rants, as when she describes the role in the 2016 campaign (and, as it turns out, foreshadows the role in the election) of voters she describes as "Tea Party-esque, gun-toting, Muslim-bashing people who believe they have a corner on the Christian faith."

I'm not as comfortable as Daniel is with the claim that there are multiple churches. If all Christians are one in Christ, then the "church I don't belong to"—let's say, a congregation that tells gay people they're going to hell—is still, in some sense, my church. Maybe being church together means that we don't get to abdicate the role of carrying one another's burdens and on some occasions even apologizing for them. I'm not advocating for the shallow form of apology that Daniel exposes, the condescending apology that makes us feel superior and sabotages our ability to talk to one another about faith. But might there be room for a deep, confessional acknowledgment that we are all complicit in the structures that hurt one another?

Confess, I suspect Daniel would reply, but don't make your confession the starting point for conversation with every stranger you meet on the street. I'm guessing she would advise us to confess communally—in worship, with all the other sinners like us, where God's grace continually finds us and shapes us into people who can move past the apologies and into a way of life that seeks justice and embodies resurrection.