

Roll call: Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

by [John Ortberg](#) in the [August 9, 2003](#) issue

Of all the questions in scripture, the single most poignant one may be recorded in the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John. Jesus has just finished giving what is regarded as one of his difficult sayings (though a friend once asked which of Jesus' sayings is *not* difficult). This one spoke of the need for people to eat his flesh and drink his blood, and the difficulty involved for anyone who wanted to follow him.

Because of this, the writer says, "many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him." It is striking that John uses the word "disciples" for those who turn back; these are apparently not just casual listeners, not the folks who show up only at Christmas and Easter. These people have been teaching Sunday school and working in the nursery, and when longtime pillars start leaving the church we get a little restless; people want to bring in consultants and do focus groups to diagnose the problem.

So Jesus called the Twelve together and put the question to them with unsettling directness: *Do you also wish to go away?*

I wonder how Jesus asked the question. I wonder if there was an edge to it—was he issuing a challenge? I sometimes imagine that he asked it sadly. Maybe he asked it with a sigh, his shoulders sagging a little. Maybe it was hard to see people who had been counted on as followers leave—to see *many followers* leave. There is something humbling about having to ask such a question.

Do you also wish to go away? I wonder sometimes how I would have responded to the question. Because at times the truth is I do wish to go away. I don't like thinking this about myself. But in times of temptation, in times when I deceive other people to avoid trouble or get what I want, in times when I deliberately close my eyes to the sight of those who are poor or marginalized because I don't want to feel guilty or bother to help, I too am one of the ones who wish to go away.

Do you also wish to go away? Peter's response is striking. He doesn't say yes, of course, but he doesn't quite say no either. Instead, in good Jesus-style, he answers back with another question: To whom else can we go? It is not, perhaps, the most

flattering answer in the world, but it is honest. It's a little reminiscent of Winston Churchill's famous description of democracy as the worst form of government except for every other form that has ever been tried. Following Jesus may not always be easy, or pleasant, or even totally comprehensible, but when it comes to the eternal-life business, to tell the truth there's not much out there in the way of alternatives.

As ethicist Lewis Smedes said, "This is where the trolley stops . . . Without Jesus we are stuck with two options: utopian illusion or deadly despair. I scorn illusion. I dread despair. So I put all my money on Jesus."

Do you also wish to go away? The young church at Ephesus is struggling to maintain its existence when the worship of Artemis or Caesar or Mammon are so much more attractive alternatives. Paul ends a letter to the Ephesians with an extended metaphor that sounds violently unattractive in our day: "Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil."

Apparently Paul did not expect following Jesus to be easy. He talks about the life of those in the church as if its going to be a kind of war. Ben Patterson writes that no soldier ever exclaimed in hurt tones during a battle: "Hey—they're shooting at me." Getting shot at is more or less what you expect when you sign up.

Paul, however, knew that the citizens of Ephesus saw helmets and breastplates, shields and swords, every day. Rome did not always speak softly, but it carried a big stick. Paul tells everyone to gear up for battle, but it is a different kind of battle. It is marked by truth—which is the first casualty of war. Its advance is marked by salvation—healing, wholeness, rather than body bags. Its gospel—its good news, the headlines of the PR department—is peace. Walter Bruggemann has written that the ancient texts of scripture can be read as subversive material, as a way for those without power to undermine and conspire against the damage being done by the "rulers and authorities." Few texts are more subversive than Paul's words at the end of this letter.

Do you also wish to go away? Jim Wallis writes that when the South African government canceled a political rally against apartheid, Desmond Tutu led a worship service in St. George's Cathedral. The walls were lined with soldiers and riot police carrying guns and bayonets, ready to close it down. Bishop Tutu began to speak of the evils of the apartheid system—how the rulers and authorities that propped it up

were doomed to fail. He pointed a finger at the police who were there to record his words: “You may be powerful—very powerful—but you are not God. God cannot be mocked. You have already lost.”

Then, in a moment of unbearable tension, the bishop seemed to soften. Coming out from behind the pulpit, he flashed that radiant Tutu smile and began to bounce up and down with glee. “Therefore, since you have already lost, we are inviting you to join the winning side.”

The crowd roared, the police melted away, and the people began to dance. Don’t go away, Paul says. Put on your armor and dance. I am inviting you to join the winning side.