

Read Acts 2:42-47; Hebrews 10:23-25; Ephesians 4:10-16

There's a statement that you may have heard before, or even said yourself. The statement is this, "You don't have to go to church to be a Christian."

While the sentiment behind the statement is understood, it's also misleading. Going to church is not what makes one a Christian that's truth. People who go to church can often lead a life steeped in sin just as much as a person who doesn't go to church. That's truth!

Often those who use the statement "You don't have to go to church to be a Christian" are using it to justify their laziness and unwillingness to commit to something bigger than themselves. Maybe that's harsh, and maybe we're wrong, but our experience with people seems to point this way.

True, you don't have to go to church to be a Christian, but you need church to help you live like one.

You need the church. The church is more than just a building; in fact the church isn't a building. The church is the body of people who are followers of Christ and who gather as a congregation to build up one another and grow with one another in Christ. You need to be a part of that more than you know.

There is a clear message in the scripture about the relational importance of the church. Scripture tells us to love one another, be devoted to one another, encourage one another, instruct one another, greet one another. These types of things can't be done unless we are a part of one another. You need the church because you need what the church can give you.

George Gallop has said, "Americans are among the loneliest people in the world."

We are a culture craving relationship. In the midst of our crowded existence, many of us are living lonely lives. We live and work in a sea of humanity, but we end up missing out on the benefits of regular, meaningful relationships.

Adam was known and loved to the core of his being by his omniscient, love-filled creator. Yet the word God uses to describe him is "alone." And God says this aloneness is "not good."

Without relationships we can:

- Lose perspective – we have no one helping to offer us balance. Sheep are never attacked in herds, they are attacked when they become isolated from the rest of the flock. My friend Darren Hileman likes to say that if our enemy can isolate us, he will eventually dominate us.
- Develop a fear of intimacy

- Become more selfish
- Have poor health – This may sound odd, but statistically if you live life without relationships you are at greater risk of sickness and poor health. Research shows that people with bad health habits but strong social ties lived significantly longer than those with good health habits who lived isolated. Imagine if you have good health habits and strong social ties. Obviously we don't know the end date of our life, and anything can happen, but wouldn't you like to better the statistics in your favor?

In John 17:11 we see where Jesus prayed that his disciples would experience the same unity of relationship with each other that Jesus had been enjoying as part of the Trinity since before the beginning of time.

Jesus' prayer was not just for the disciples. He prayed for our relationships as well.

Read John 17:20-21

We need relational maturity (a continual progress of growth) in three vital areas of our lives:

- Relationship with God
- Relationships with believers (The human propensity is to drift. We need mutual encouragement and accountability from others.)
- Relationships with unbelievers (invest and invite)

Our relationships with believers are strengthened through our living life in community with believers.

Look at the growth that took place in the early church:

Acts 1:15 – there were 120 believers

Acts 2:41 – 3000 were added to the church

Acts 2:47 – new salvations were happening daily

Acts 4:4 – the number of men grew to 5000

Acts 5:14 – more and more believed and a multitude was added

Acts 21:20 – tens of thousands have become believers (the Greek word for thousands is *urias* (moo-ree-as) which in another verse is translated 50 thousand and in another verse is translated a million. It literally means an immeasurable amount.)

Let's go back to see how it all happened. From Acts 2:42-47 we see what happened.

What did they do?

- They studied the Bible together.
- They fellowshiped together.
- They ate together.

- They prayed for each other.
- They helped each other.
- They worshipped together.
- They invited others to join them.

Where did they do it?

- In large gatherings in the temple.
- In smaller gatherings in their homes.

Not only did the early church have services, but they also had community with group life.

We need both. We need our time together as a church family being inspired by the word of God, and worshiping with songs of adoration to our Savior and Lord. We also need times where we can be in environments where we can develop relationships that encourage, build up, admonish, fellowship and do all the one another's.

Here's what a lot of us think when it comes to being involved in community:

- "I don't have enough time to do this." –What matters most to you? What's the wise thing to do with your time? We have time for the things we value most. Taking advantage of opportunities to grow your spiritual life and your connection with other believers is something that will benefit you individually, in your marriage, in your family, & in other connections you have. You can't be involved in every thing we offer, but at least be involved in something.
- "I won't fit in." – The root of this battle is insecurity. What if Moses would have given in to his insecurities? What if Gideon would have given in to his? You may have heard the parable of the talents, there's the one man who didn't invest, he just buried his talent. What if he did this not because he was lazy but because he was insecure? The Bible actually says that he was afraid. God has not given us a spirit of fear. We are fearfully and wonderfully made. We are created in Christ Jesus, in the image of God. Proverbs tells us that the fear of man is a trap. Don't let insecurity rob you of what God wants to do in you and through you.
- "I'm not spiritual enough." – You don't have to be a biblical scholar; you just need to be hungry for the word of God. You don't have to come with all the answers; it's ok to come with questions. The whole point of community is to help us all grow together spiritually.
- "People are going to expect me to share." You're thinking your privacy is going to be invaded. You share what you are willing to share. You don't have to open up and talk about anything more than you want to talk about. No one is going to ask you to lie on a couch, while everyone else examines the complexities of your mind. It's about building relationships and growing spiritually.

- “What am I going to do with my kids?” There are always options. If childcare isn’t offered, ask others what they do. If you are creative enough together, we bet you could come up with ways as well.

Here are the benefits of community:

- Fill more connected. As mentioned earlier, there are more than fifty “one another” commands in Scripture and these can’t simply be filled with a casual conversation at a weekend service.
- Spend more time in the Bible and find understanding.
- Receive support from other believers.
- Be around people who can encourage the transformation process God wants to do in your life.
- Ultimately grow spiritually and relationally.

Just as much as you need the church, the church needs you. Your presence matters more than you think.

We often underestimate the significance of our presence when we think it doesn’t matter that we aren’t here. We undervalue the power of the Spirit of God residing in us when we believe staying home is just as good as showing up. We possibly miss what God wants to do through us and for us when we stay home.

The New Testament church knows nothing about a Christian who is not connected to a church. Your gifts, skills, ideas, service, leadership, resources, love – everything you have to offer – is crucial to a congregation thriving and the Kingdom of God advancing.

Your physical presence, words of encouragement, and acts of service, combined with what others bring, is what makes the people of God. When you go to church with a missional mindset, you go looking to engage, looking to encourage, looking to serve.

Church is more than just coming on Sunday morning to be fed spiritually. If that’s all it were then reading books or watching your favorite preacher on tv or online would be enough. But it’s not. The purpose of church is so much broader than that. Church is corporate worship, praying and studying the Bible together, serving one another and reaching out in mission together.

So no, you don’t have to go to church to be a Christian, but you need church to help you live like one.

Ephesians tells us that our service towards one another is what builds us up, grows us up, and unifies us as the body of Christ.

Read 1 Peter 4:10

When we think of service, this is how we should see it: as a gift.

Your act of service is a gift that God has given you to be able to do, and it is a gift to someone else.

Read Matthew 8:14-15

Notice the first thing that Peter's mother-in-law did when Jesus healed her. She got up and began to serve.

Too often when we receive our blessing, when we receive the answer to our prayer, we go on with our life only to come back to God when we need Him again. We should take a lesson from Peter's mother-in-law. We should find a way to serve. Find a way to use the blessing we received to bless someone else.

In serving others, we serve Christ. In serving others, we grow in our relationship with Christ. In serving others, we remember how Christ has served us. In serving others, we remember that it's not about us, but about Christ.

Being a servant is not being a lowly peasant, being a servant is being like Christ.

Read Matthew 20:20-28

Our position is not what defines our service, our posture is. James and John were concerned about their position. They were concerned about their place in line.

It's easy to do that. We like it when people see us as important. We like it when it feels like we have some kind of authority and we can speak and we believe people will listen. But we need to understand that position and titles are not what give us that.

The harder you serve, the greater your voice is heard.

If our ultimate goal is to become like Christ, then our ultimate goal is to serve in whatever way we can.

Read John 13:1-17

Jesus gave his disciples and us another great visual of service, and that's a towel.

He told His disciples that this is the example that you are to follow.

Verse 16 says, "I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him." In other words, Christ is saying

that if you share the gospel in a different way than this, you are saying you're better than the one who sent you; you're better than Christ.

Read Philippians 2:3-8; 14-16a (verse 15 tells us why we serve)

We serve to show the God who is in us.

Imagine if we all grabbed a hold of this concept.

Imagine if we quit striving for position and recognition and start seeking how we can just serve where we are needed.

Imagine if we let go of our insecurities and just trusted that God's word is true and we do have something to give.

Imagine if we all began to be used in some way, and allowed our gifts to be expressed through the body of Christ. Imagine the impact that could be made in this community, in the lives of people around us.

Can't you just see Acts 2 taking place, where the church becomes more effective as the body ministers to the body and people are being transformed from a life of sin and bondage on a daily basis.

Can't you see what Hebrews 10 talks about, a family of believers who are unswerving in their faith and encouraging to one another.

This is the body of Christ. This is the church. You need the church and the church needs you.

You have a gift to give. You have an act of service to perform. You are more fulfilled in Christ, when you understand that a life transformed by Christ is a life that serves for Christ, a life involved in community!