

Christians Go to Church – Hebrews 10:25

Some sports cannot be played alone. Basketball, baseball, soccer and football are all team sports. It's true you can shoot baskets, skate around the hockey rink, throw a football, kick a soccer ball or hit a baseball by yourself, but you can never play the game alone. The truth is that you can't even get really good at it by yourself. There's a huge difference between shooting baskets alone in a gym and playing together on a team of five.

In the same way, the Christian life was never intended to be lived alone. You can read the Bible, you can pray, you can sing songs of worship all by yourself, but it takes a team to make a fully committed disciple of Jesus Christ.

That's why we have the church. It was Jesus' idea in the first place and he made it an integral part of being a Christian. From the very start Jesus chose a dozen followers to be on his team. When he sent them out they were always sent together in groups. He designed the entire plan for transforming lives around relationships together among his disciples.

Jesus called his team of followers "the church." Unfortunately, we have come to think of the church in ways that Jesus never intended. For example, the church is always people, never a building. You can read through the entire Bible and you will never ever find the word "church" used for the gathering place of Christians. The Greek word for "church" is *ecclesia*; it means "the people who are called." Personally, I try never to refer to the meeting place as a church because it is not. It's like a family and a house. The family may live in the house but the house is not a family.

The church is meant to be a movement, not an institution. The church is made up of Christians who gather to worship God, learn about Jesus, love one another and reach out as Jesus' followers. It

was never intended to be a complicated organization with layers of bureaucracy, denominational labels and all the complexities of a multi-national corporation. Yes, there has to be organization—any time you put people together you need rules to run the team. But the organization is always to serve the movement and not the other way around.

When Jesus started the church it was small. Probably those first followers would never have dreamed what would happen. Today there are over 400,000 congregations in the United States alone and more than two billion followers of Jesus identified with churches around the globe. Some churches are healthy and some are ill. Some are strong and some are weak. Some are large with hundreds of thousands of people in single congregations while others are a dozen or less meeting secretly at night in private homes.

For followers of Jesus Christ the church is not an option. It is on the list with the Bible, commitment, prayer and the other basic elements of Christian discipleship. Let's see why.

The number one reason for Christians to belong to a church is Jesus Christ. Jesus said in Matthew 16:18, "I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." Jesus set out to build his church out of his followers. He had a dream of a church that would teach the truth, live righteously and be filled with followers who would love one another. He promised that the power and authority of Satan himself could not destroy or defeat his church.

As Christians we are devoted to Jesus. We are on his side. We have promised to make his priorities our priorities. If Jesus wants to build his church, then we want to build his church.

At the end of my life I expect to report to Jesus. I don't expect him to ask me about education, pub-

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lishing, broadcasting or a thousand other good causes. I expect him to ask me about his church. Not that the other things are not good and important because I believe that they are. It's just that Jesus made so clear in the Bible that his first priority is his church and, as a disciple of Jesus, his priority must be my priority.

In the New Testament book of Ephesians (and elsewhere in the New Testament), the church is repeatedly referred to as "The Body of Christ." This is a very important teaching for disciples of Jesus to understand. The Bible refers to two bodies of Jesus. Body number one is the physical body of Jesus that was born in Bethlehem, grew up in Nazareth, died on the cross, was buried, rose back to life and ascended to heaven. When Body Number One was on earth it represented God on earth. Body Number One had supernatural gifts to accomplish God's purposes. When Jesus returned to heaven he established Body Number Two.

Body Number Two is the church of Jesus Christ of which every Christian is a part. Our job is to represent God on earth. Body Number Two has supernatural gifts to accomplish God's purposes. We are the body of Jesus Christ in our world today!

The reason Christians gather and participate in churches is for Jesus' sake. We do this for Jesus. It is impossible to be a committed disciple of Jesus independent of the church.

Some Christians may object. They argue that churches have problems. Churches have people they don't like. Churches often fail to faithfully obey the Bible. Churches have all kinds of things they don't like—songs, sermons, offerings, buildings, programs . . . and especially people. Therefore, some Christians divorce themselves from the church of Jesus Christ because it doesn't measure up to their expectations and standards.

Well, I agree. Churches do often fall short. Churches have problems. Churches fail. But so does my body. It doesn't look the way I would like it to look. It doesn't do what I would like it to do. It doesn't feel the way I would like it to feel. But, I don't give up on it. I do the best I can with

the body I have. And, it's the same with the church. We do the best we can with the Body of Christ that we have.

Most important of all, disciples participate in the life of the church for Jesus' sake. We give Christ's church our love, loyalty and support for the sake of Christ our Savior and Lord.

While we engage in the church most for Jesus, we also are here for others. Hebrews 10:23-25 says:

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another.

Isn't that interesting? The reason Christians come to church is to encourage and help others. We don't do it for ourselves; we do it to bless others. Romans 15:1 tells us, "We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up." We go to church to strengthen others. We go to church to help those who are hurting and failing. We go to church to please our neighbors and to build them up.

John Kennedy's most famous line from his inauguration speech was, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." That's the way the church, the Body of Christ, functions. We go to church to be a blessing more than to be blessed. We go to give more than to receive. We go to serve more than to be served. We go for others.

There is not a week that goes by when I do not hear a story of those who have been blessed by Christians in the church. Sometimes the stories are secondhand, but most often they are letters, notes, phone calls or personal conversations. I am told about hurting people who received the prayers of people from Wooddale Church. I read about families that have been blessed by the financial generosity of those they know from church—individuals who give away money, hospitality, free plane

tickets, Bibles, cars and more to help others. They don't do it for recognition or for a tax deduction. They do it because they are part of the Body of Christ and they love to bless others.

A few months ago a pastor's wife in another state introduced herself to me and told about her difficult childhood twenty-some years ago as a young girl growing up in the Twin Cities. Her family had no money and nothing to eat. She said that her schoolteacher showed up at the door with a load of food to feed them all. She said it impacted her life forever. When she and her husband and children travel to Minnesota every few years they always attend Wooddale Church with the hope of seeing that teacher who was the agent of Jesus Christ in her life.

Why does a disciple of Jesus Christ go to church? Why does a disciple attend services, become a church member, teach Sunday School, give money, meet people, pray for others, shake hands, warmly smile, pray regularly for strangers and friends? Why is church such an important part of being a disciple of Jesus Christ? The answer is simple: for Christ—and for others.

Now there is a third reason but it must be the last reason. We share in the life of the church for ourselves. The personal benefits are enormous. Researchers have been studying people who regularly attend church. Church people live longer, happier and healthier lives; they have a greater sense of purpose and well-being. Church actually pays significant dividends.

Maybe you would like to argue that point by pointing out someone you know who goes to church and is miserable. This person is chronically unhappy. Always complaining. Always criticizing. Always finding fault with church life and church people. Does this disprove the research? No. This is a person who has gotten the priorities out of

order. This is often the man or woman who puts self first and puts others and Christ later on the list.

The church is the classroom for discipleship. It's where we learn the Bible. It's where we are taught what Jesus wants, where we can see the impact of God on the lives of others.

The church is the community for fellowship. It's where we belong, and it's where we have friends. It's where we are part of a family. It's where we find those who will encourage us when we are down, confront us when we are wrong, help us when we can't make it on our own.

The church is the place for service because every Christian has gifts. Whether your gifts are teaching, giving, praying, administering, helping, singing or serving -- the church is the place where you are needed and wanted. You are important. You are part of something bigger than you are. You can go out from the church to reach the world with God's love and truth.

The church is your team. Together we can do what none of us can do alone. The church is the place where we meet together, worship together, give together, learn together, think together, serve together, cry together, dream together and go together. Together we can start new churches. To-

gether we can send missionaries. Together we can help the poor. Together we can be the Body of Christ to our generation.

The goal of the church of Jesus Christ should never be to get people more involved. The goal of the church is to make more disciples for Jesus Christ. That is something we do together as God's team here on earth.

Let me tell you about my own experience. I grew up in the church. I'm a pastor's son. When

In the church I have learned about God, been loved by Christians, seen the depth of Christian commitment, been powerfully impacted by the Christian faithfulness and service of other believers in Jesus Christ—all beyond anything I ever dreamed possible.

Charleen and I were first married we lived in Peoria, Illinois, where I was a university student and she worked for the daily newspaper. We attended and served in a church of about 50 people. From there we moved to Colorado where she worked for a bank. I was a seminary student and a new pastor. For the past 25 years we have been at Wooddale Church. I think I know well the challenges and weaknesses of churches. But, overwhelmingly, my conclusion after a lifetime of church connection is simple and direct: *I love Jesus Christ and I love the church of Jesus Christ.* In the church I have learned about God, been loved by Christians, seen the depth of Christian commitment, been powerfully impacted by the Christian faithfulness and service of other believers in Jesus Christ—all beyond anything I ever dreamed possible.

In the New Testament it was very clear what it meant to belong to the church. When the Holy Spirit poured out great blessing, it was on the church. When missionaries were sent out, they were sent out by the church. When the government decided to persecute Christians, they persecuted those who were part of the church. To be a Christian was to be a “churchian”; to be a disciple was to be part of the church of Jesus Christ.

Is that you? As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are the church. We are his Body. We are not just people who attend. We are not just observers. We are not those who are simply on the fringe. We are not those who refer to the church as “you” or “them”, but as “us”, as “we”. We are fully committed followers of Jesus Christ, and as fully committed followers of Jesus Christ, may our discipleship be lived out in the family, the team, of the church of Jesus Christ.

When we talk about discipleship it is never merely limited to information. It always calls for action. So I offer to you a list from which you can

choose one or all ten—The Church Commandments for Disciples of Jesus:

1. Love the church as Christ loves the church.
2. Seek to serve more than to be served.
3. Come to worship—*expect to experience God.*
4. Come to grow—*listen, learn and obey.*
5. Love others.
6. Pray for others.
7. Bless others—*including other churches.*
8. Join with others—*not just an attender or observer.*
9. Recruit others—*to Christ and the church.*
10. Make the church of Jesus Christ all that God wants the church to be.

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