



Why I Don't Go To Church Anymore: Living in the Relational Church - Part 6

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Dear Fellow-believer,

I do appreciate your concern for me and your willingness to raise issues that have caused you concern. I know the way I relate to the church is a bit unconventional and some even call it dangerous. Believe me, I understand that concern because I used to think that way myself and even taught others to as well. If you are happy with the status quo of organized religion today, you may not like what you read here. My purpose is not to convince you to see this incredible church the same way I do, but to answer your questions as openly and honestly as I can. Even if we don't end up agreeing, hopefully you will understand that our differences need not estrange us as members of Christ's body.

Where do you go to church?

I have never liked this question, even when I was able to answer it with a specific organization. I know what it means culturally, but it is based on a false premise--that church is something you can go to as in a specific event, location or organized group. I think Jesus looks at the church quite differently. He didn't talk about it as a place to go to, but a way of living in relationship to him and to other followers of his.

Asking me where I go to church is like asking me where I go to Jacobsen. How do I answer that? I am a Jacobsen and where I go a Jacobsen is. 'Church' is that kind of word. It doesn't identify a location or an institution. It describes a people and how they relate to each other. If we lose sight of that, our understanding of the church will be distorted and we'll miss out on much of its joy.

Are you just trying to avoid the question?

I know it may only sound like quibbling over words, but words are important. When we only ascribe the term 'church' to weekend gatherings or institutions that have organized themselves as 'churches' we miss out on what it means to live as Christ's body. It will give us a false sense of security to think that by attending a meeting once a week we are participating in God's church. Conversely I hear people talk about 'leaving the church' when they stop attending a specific congregation.

But if the church is something we are, not someplace we go, how can we leave it unless we abandon Christ himself? And if I think only of a specific congregation as my part of the church, haven't I separated myself from a host of other brothers and sisters that do not attend the same one I do?

The idea that those who gather on Sunday mornings to watch a praise concert and listen to a teaching are part of the church and those who do not, are not, would be foreign to Jesus. The issue is not where we are at a given time during the weekend, but how we are living in him and with other believers all week long.

But don't we need regular fellowship?

I wouldn't say we need it. If we were in a place where we couldn't find other believers, Jesus certainly would be able to take care of us. Thus, I'd phrase that a bit differently: Will people who are growing to know the Living God also desire real and meaningful connections with other believers? Absolutely! The call to the kingdom is not a call to isolation. Every person I've ever met who is thriving in the life of Jesus has a desire to share authentic fellowship with other believers. They realize that whatever they know of God's life is just in part, and only the fullest revelation of him is in the church.

But sometimes that kind of fellowship is not easy to find. Periodically on this journey we may go through times when we can't seem to find any other believers who share our hunger. That's especially true for those who find that conforming to the expectations of the religious institutions around them diminishes their relationship with Jesus. They may find themselves excluded by believers with whom they've shared close friendship. But no one going through that looks on that time as a treat. It is incredibly painful and they will look for other hungry believers to share the journey with.

My favorite expression of body life is where a local group of people chooses to walk together for a bit of the journey by cultivating close friendships and learning how to listen to God together.

Shouldn't we be committed to a local fellowship?

That has been said so often today, that most of us assume it is in the Bible somewhere. I haven't found it yet. Many of us have been led to believe that we can't possibly survive without the 'covering of the body' and will either fall into error or backslide into sin. But doesn't that happen inside our local congregations as well?

I know many people who live outside those structures and find not only an ever-deepening relationship with God, but also connections with other believers that run far deeper than they found in the institution. I haven't lost any of my passion for Jesus or my affection for his church. If anything those have grown by leaps and bounds in recent years.

Scripture does encourage us to be devoted to one another not committed to an institution. Jesus indicated that whenever two or three people get together focused on him, they would experience the vitality of church life.

Is it helpful to regularly participate in a local expression of that reality? Of course. But we make a huge mistake when we assume that fellowship takes place just because we attend the same event together, even regularly, or because we belong to the same organization. Fellowship happens where people share the journey of knowing Jesus together. It consists of open, honest sharing, genuine concern about each other's spiritual well being and encouragement for people to follow Jesus however he leads them.

But don't our institutions keep us from error?

I'm sorry to burst your bubble here, but every major heresy that has been inflicted on God's people for the last 2,000 years has come from organized groups with 'leaders' who thought they knew God's mind better than anyone around them. Conversely, virtually every move of God among people hungering for him was rejected by the 'church' of that day and were excluded, excommunicated or executed for following God. If that is where you hope to find security, I'm afraid it is sorely misplaced. Jesus didn't tell us that 'going to church' would keep us safe, but that trusting him would. He gave us an anointing of the Spirit so that we would know the difference between truth and error. That anointing is cultivated as we learn his ways in his Word and grow closer to his heart. It will help you recognize when expressions of church you share life with becomes destructive to his work in you.

So are traditional congregations wrong?

Absolutely not! I have found many of them with people who love God and are seeking to grow in his ways. I visit a couple of dozen different congregations a year that I find are far more centered on relationship than religion. Jesus is at the center of their life together, and those who act as leaders are true servants and not playing politics of leadership, so that all are encouraged to minister to one another.

I pray that even more of them are renewed in a passion for Jesus, a genuine concern for each other and a willingness to serve the world with God's love. But I think we'd have to admit that these are rare in our communities and many only last for a short span before they unwittingly look to institutional answers for the needs of the body instead of remaining dependent on Jesus. When that happens do not feel condemned if God leads you not to go along with them.

So should I stop going to church, too?

I'm afraid that question also misses the point. You see I don't believe you're going to church any more than I am. We're just part of it. Be your part, however Jesus calls you to and wherever he places you. Not all of us grow in the same environment.

If you gather with a group of believers at a specific time and place and that participation helps you grow closer to Jesus and allows you to follow his work in you, by all means don't think you have to leave. Keep in mind, however, that of itself is not the church. It is just one of many expressions of it in the place where you live.

Don't be tricked into thinking that just because you attend its meetings you are experiencing real body life. That only comes as God connects you with a handful of brothers and sisters with whom you can build close friendships and share the real ups and downs of this journey.

That can happen among traditional congregations, as it can also happen beyond them. In the last seven years I've met hundreds if not thousands of people who have grown disillusioned with traditional congregations and are thriving spiritually as they share God's life with others, mostly in their homes.

Then meeting in homes is the answer?

Of course not. But let's be clear: as fun as it is to enjoy large group worship and even be instructed by gifted teachers, the real joy of body life can't be shared in huge groups. The church for its first 300 years found the home the perfect place to gather. They are much more suited to the dynamics of family which is how Jesus described his body.

But meeting in homes is no cure-all. I've been to some very sick home meetings and met in facilities with groups who shared an authentic body life together. But the time I spend in regular body life I want to spend face to face with a group of people. I know it isn't popular today where people find it is far easier to sit through a finely-tuned (or not so finely-tuned) service and go home without ever having to open up our life or care about another person's journey.

But ultimately what matters most to me is not where or how they meet, but whether or not people are focused on Jesus and really helping each other on the journey to becoming like him. Meetings are less the issue here than the quality of relationships. I am always looking for people like that wherever I am and always rejoice when I find it. In our new home in Oxnard, we've found a few folks and are hopeful to find even more.

Aren't you just reacting out of hurt?

I suppose that is possible and time will tell, I guess, but I honestly don't believe so. Anyone who is engaged in real body life will get hurt at times. But there are two kinds of hurt. There's the kind of pain that points to a problem that can be fixed with the right care - such as a badly sprained ankle. Then there's the kind of pain that can only be fixed by pulling away - as when you put your hand on a hot stove.

Perhaps all of us have experienced some measure of pain as we have tried to fit God's life into institutions. For a long time most of us hung in there hoping if we tweaked a few things it would get better. Though we could be successful in limited ways during moments of renewal, we also discovered that eventually the conformity an institution demands and the freedom people need to grow in Christ are at odds with one another. It has happened with virtually every group formed throughout the history of Christianity.

Are you looking for the perfect church?

No, and I don't anticipate finding one this side of eternity. Perfection is not my goal, but finding people with God's priorities. It's one thing for people to struggle toward an ideal they share together. It's another to realize that our ideals have little in common.

I make no secret of the fact that I am deeply troubled by the state of organized Christianity. Most of what we call 'church' today are nothing more than well-planned performances with little actual connection between believers. Believers are encouraged toward a growing dependency on the system or its leadership rather than on Jesus himself. We spend more energy conforming behavior to what the institution needs rather than helping people be transformed at the foot of the cross!

I'm tired of trying to fellowship with people who only view church as a two-hour a week dumping ground for guilt while they live the rest of the week with the same priorities as the world. I'm tired of those who depend on their own works of righteousness but who have no compassion for the people of the world. I'm tired of

insecure people using the Body of Christ as an extension of their own ego and will manipulate it to satisfy their own needs. I'm tired of sermons more filled with the bondage of religion than the freedom of God's love and where relationships take a back seat to the demands of an efficient institution.

But don't our children need church activities?

I'd suggest that what they need most is to be integrated into God's life through relational fellowship with other believers. 92% of children who grow up in Sunday schools with all the puppets and high-powered entertainment, leave 'church' when they leave their parents' home? Instead of filling our children with ethics and rules we need to demonstrate how to live in God's life together.

Even sociologists tell us that the #1 factor in determining whether a child will thrive in society is if they have deep, personal friendships with nonrelative adults. No Sunday school can fill that role. I know of one community in Australia who after 20 years of sharing God's life together as families could say that they had not lost one child to the faith as they grew into adulthood. I know I cut across the grain here, but it is far more important that our children experience real fellowship among believers rather than the bells and whistles of a slick children's program.

What dynamics of body life do you look for?

I'm always looking for a people who are seeking to follow the Living Christ. He is at the center of their lives, their affections and their conversation. They look to be authentic and free others to hurt when they hurt, to question what they question and to follow his voice without others accusing them of being divisive or rebellious. I look for people who are not wasting their money on extravagant buildings or flashy programs; where people sitting next to each other are not strangers; and where they all participate as a priesthood to God instead of watch passively from a safe distance.

Aren't you giving people an excuse to sit home and do nothing?

I hope not, though I know it is a danger. I realize some people who leave traditional congregations end up abusing that freedom to satisfy their own desires and thus miss out on church life altogether. Neither am I a fan of 'church hoppers', who whip around to one place after another looking for the latest fad or the best opportunity to fulfill their own selfish desires.

But most of the people I meet and talk with are not outside the system because they have lost their passion for Jesus or his people, but only because the traditional congregations near them couldn't satisfy their hunger for relationship. They are seeking authentic expressions of body life and pay an incredible cost to seek it out. Believe me, we would all find it easier just to go with the flow, but once you've tasted of living fellowship between passionate believers, it is impossible to settle for anything less.

Isn't this view of church divisive?

Not of itself. People make it divisive when they demand that people conform to their revelation of truth. Most of us on the journey are accused of being divisive because freedom can be threatening to those who find their security in a religious system. But most of us aren't trying to recruit others to leave their congregations. We see the body of Christ big enough to encompass God's people however he calls them to gather. One of the things often said about traditional church is that Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in American culture. We only meet with people who look like we do and like things the way we do. I've found now that I have far more opportunity to get with people from a broader cross-section of his body. I don't

demand others do it my way and I hope in time that those who see it differently will stop demanding we conform to theirs.

Where can I find that kind of fellowship?

There's no easy answer here. It might be right in front of you among the fellowship you're already in. It might be down the street in your neighborhood or across a cubicle at work. You can also get involved in compassionate outreaches to the needy and broken in your locality as a way to live out his life in you and meet others with a similar hunger.

Don't expect this kind of fellowship to fall easily into an organization. It is organic, and Jesus can lead you to it right where you are. Look for him to put a dozen or so folks around your life with whom you can share the journey. They may not even all go to the same congregation you do. They might be neighbors or coworkers who are following after God. Wouldn't that kind of interconnection among God's people yield some incredible fruit?

Don't expect it to be easy or run smoothly. It will take some specific choices on our part to be obedient to Jesus. It may take some training to shake off old habits and be free to let him build his community around you, but it is all worth it. I know it bothers some people that I don't take my regular place in a pew on Sunday morning, but I can tell you absolutely that my worst days outside organized religion are still better than my best days inside it. To me the difference is like listening to someone talk about golf or actually taking a set of clubs out to a course and playing golf. Being his church is like that. In our day we don't need more talk about the church, but people who are simply ready to live in its reality.

People all over the world are freshly discovering how to do that again. You can be one of them as you let him place you in his body as he desires.

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